

Qualification: CIPD Diploma in Applied Human Resources

Module Name: Understanding the Management of Employment
Relations

Word Count: 3646

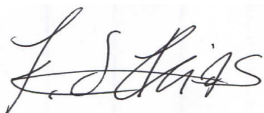
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Date: 19 October 2020

Introduction

This briefing paper discusses the definition and concept of employee engagement. What the implications engagement has for organisations and what strategies and practices can be administered to achieve positive organisational outcomes. It will also review the evidence to support effective engagement strategies as well as consider the future for employee engagement.

Employee Engagement

Kahn (1990) first expressed engagement through the psychology of physical, cognitive and emotional expression. Physical engagement is seen as mental energy and resilience, Cognitive engagement is concentration and happiness and emotional engagement relates to enthusiasm and pride in one's work (Johns and Ellis, 2016).

The CIPD (2014, cited in Johns and Ellis, 2016, p.81) defines employee engagement (EE) as a commitment to an organisation and its values, combined with a willingness to help colleagues. The concept covers job satisfaction, passion, identifying with tasks, energy in completing work, citizenship behaviour and alignment to organisational strategy (CIPD, 2019a). The CIPD (2012) also cites two types of engagement; transactional and emotional. Transactional engagement is an employee's interest in reward therefore engagement in their role is a necessity rather than a desire. Emotional engagement is when employees are emotionally invested in their role, they enjoy their work and identify with organisational values and objectives (CIPD, 2012).

EE also outlines the right conditions for an organisation's employees to achieve their best every day through commitment to organisational goals and values, so they are motivated to contribute to the organisation's success (Engage for Success, 2020). MacLeod (no date, cited in Engage for Success, 2020) states that employee engagement is "...about how we create the conditions in which employees offer more of their capability and potential". However, engagement is discretionary, meaning that employees will not automatically be engaged. If employees feel supported by the employer, and in particular, their line manager, they will respond with positive behaviour. This perceived organisational support can lead to discretionary behaviour (Purcell, 2010). It is important to note that discretionary effort cannot be achieved by manipulating employees' commitment and their emotions as employees often see through such attempts which can have the opposite effect, in where they become disengaged (Engage for Success, 2020).

Other concepts such as organisational commitment, refers to employees' psychological connection to their organisation (Johns and Ellis, 2016). Individual organisational commitment is split into three terms:

- Effective- the positive emotional attachment and alignment to organisational goals.
- Continuance- This ties in with the CIPD term of transactional engagement. Here the individual is only committed as a result of financial gain, job security, etc.
- Normative- is the commitment to stay in an organisation because the individual feels indebted or obliged to stay as a result of personal investment.

Commitment can be contrasted with terms such as job satisfaction as there is no significant difference in their personal interest and that of their organisation.

HR, leadership and cultural elements of employee engagement.

There are various characteristics associated with organisations that have high levels of employee engagement (Armstrong and Taylor, 2020):

- Job challenge
- Autonomy
- Employee Trust in management
- Satisfaction with reward and recognition
- Involvement with decision making
- Quality of leadership

These characteristics outline an importance for Human resource management (HRM) activities that support and fulfil positive engagement through policy, terms and conditions, etc (Johns and Ellis, 2016).

Macleod and Clarke (2009, cited in Johns and Ellis, 2016,) provide a framework of four enablers for employee engagement; a strategic narrative; engaging managers; employee voice and Integrity. Quality leadership which has “a strong, transparent and explicit organisational culture which gives employees a line of sight between their job and the vision and aims of the organisation”(Macleod and Clarke, 2009, p.33).

Managers play a lead role in facilitating EE, through their support, setting of clear expectations, provision of feedback and being fair to their employees is positively related to EE (Armstrong and Taylor, 2020, p.274). The CIPD (2011, cited in CIPD, 2017) also highlights that managers were one of the most important influences on engagement. Other research also outlines the link between EE and different positive leadership approaches (CIPD, 2017).

Employee voice considers seeking and listening to employee opinions and responding appropriately, through effective communication (Marchington and Wilkinson, 2012). Employee communication is an essential part of HR's role. Effective internal communication is important for developing trust and can impact on engagement, organisational culture and productivity (CIPD, 2020a).

Finally, organisational integrity is the “...belief among employees that the organisation lives its values, and that...behavioural norms are adhered to, resulting in trust and a sense of integrity” (MacLeod and Clarke, 2009). The world renowned company, Google, highly values employee engagement and puts their employees first in order to support the company's overall success (MacLeod and Clarke, 2009).

Organisations with low levels of engagement are more likely to be found where there is perceived unfairness in rewards, where there is bullying and harassment and where people believe they are stuck in their jobs and feel cut off from open communications (Purcell, 2010).

It is important to consider organisational context in relation to EE. Organisations are affected by many different factors, including organisation size, sector, market conditions, as well as the state of the current economy. Therefore HRM policies and strategy need to be both vertically and horizontally aligned and take into account these factors in order to successfully tie in with EE (Johns and Ellis, 2016).

Employee engagement in HR strategy and practice

EE is an increasingly vital dimension of HR strategy and practice, however we need to consider the macro factors which can influence an organisation and the engagement of its employees. For individual organisations a good place to start is to use the PESTLE tool to identify these factors. Prevalent factors of the current age would be the Coronavirus pandemic, BREXIT and the UK recession.

Purcell believes that putting employees at the centre of policy and practice means that the focus needs to be on management behaviours to build engagement more than rules and regulations (Purcell, 2010). The policy and practice implications of EE are often captured in 'high performance working practices' (Purcell, 2010), aspects of which are explored below.

Recruitment and onboarding is an important HR process that can help to foster EE from day one. At Ecigarette Direct (ECD) the organisation communicates the value of employee engagement through their company mission statement and values in order to embed an engagement culture (Vance, 2006). Research has found that 53% of HR professionals felt that EE levels rise with a strong onboarding process. Let's not forget that we can also engage potential employees before they even join an organisation (Hearne, 2019) through a strong employer brand.

The hotelier, Malmaison, as part of expansion plans rolled out new performance management systems and offered more learning and development opportunities for staff. Results saw increased retention and reduced recruitment costs. Engage for Success (2012) believe that “engaged employees perform better, they work more vigorously, offer innovative suggestions, and to pursue their work objectives in the face of substantial obstacles”. Having a robust performance management framework will assist these employees to make a meaningful difference to organisational success (Engage for Success, 2012).

Employee voice is when employees' views are sought out, listened to and are considered in organisational decision making. Being heard reinforces a sense of belonging within an organisation (Engage for Success, 2012). As such, HRMS should have a strong design focused on effective

communication and active listening. The Institute for Employment Studies (2014) found that employee voice leads to higher trust in senior leaders and to better relationships with line managers, both of which are also related to high levels of EE.

Engagement has many benefits for different stakeholders, for example, employers benefit from engaged employees as they are seen to be happier and healthier and so perform better (CIPD, 2014). One study found that organisations with the highest engagement scores averaged 18% higher productivity than those with the lowest engagement scores (Gallup, 2010), therefore proving a positive relationship between EE and organisational performance. Superior business performance benefits shareholders, with organisations with high EE levels outperforming their low engagement counterparts in total shareholder returns and higher annual net income (Kenexa research 2008, cited in Engage For Success, 2012). A study conducted by Marks & Spencer looked at the changes in engagement from one year to the next and found a correlation with sales performance. Stores with improved engagement had averaged £62 million more sales to the business than stores with declining engagement (Engage For Success, 2012).

External customers also benefit from high levels of EE as employees are committed to the organisation, leading to increased levels of customer service which translated to increased levels of customer satisfaction. Gallup (2010) found that employees with positive attitudes towards their organisation "...carried those attitudes over to customers and engaged in discretionary efforts necessary to deliver high levels of customer service" (Gallup, 2010, cited in Engage For Success, 2012). These employees, through their positive engagement, can also promote their employer brand which benefits all stakeholders (Johns and Ellis, 2016, p.85), for example it may benefit the recruitment team as a strong brand attracts more talent, making it easier and quicker to hire the right candidate. High levels of engagement can also benefit external stakeholders, such as suppliers, etc. This can mean that improved relationships are built leading to increased business outcomes such as an effective supply chain.

Engagement is multi dimensional, what engages one group of employees will differ from another, therefore one size does not fit all and this means that employers have to understand the different drivers of engagement in different parts of their business (Purcell, 2010).

Employee engagement: the data

Engagement in an organisation is measurable through various sources of micro data. Measuring engagement is simply a tool to allow you to find out how engaged employees are. There are various sources for EE related data such as case studies, national surveys such as the ones produced by the Office for National Statistics (ONS), industry surveys as well as Micro data from individual organisations.

Examples of sources of organisational micro data and HR analytics are explored below:

Staff Satisfaction Surveys- Macleod and Clarke (2009) believe that the data gathered from employee engagement surveys should allow organisations to address issues identified in the survey. However surveys do have their limitations. Some organisations use them as an annual tick box exercise and don't follow up on the findings. Scores from such surveys also doesn't explain the reasons for engagement (Purcell, 2010). Finally employees are not always honest with these surveys, especially if they aren't anonymised.

Job Growth- We note that macro factors such as current labor market trends hugely impact job growth in organisations, however organisation micro data on job growth can indicate other factors that may not be directly linked to such macro factors. The Gallup (2010) global employee engagement study found that engaged employees were twice as likely than actively disengaged employees to say their organisation is hiring and expanding its workforce, with one third of actively disengaged employees declaring that their organisation is letting people go. This could translate as organisation struggling as a result of global factors but could also simply indicate a badly run organisation with low levels of EE.

Staff Turnover- A high staff turnover is costly to organisations through the cost of having to recruit and train new starters but also organisations with high turnover often have a negative employer brand. An

Engage for success study (Macleod and Clarke, 2009) found that engaged employees were 87% less likely to leave the organisation than disengaged employees.

Sickness Rates- Gallup (2010) Found that 22% of actively disengaged employees reported health problems that prevented them from completing normal activities with engaged employees being less likely to report health problems. This can cut two ways, health problems can mean that employees are less engaged at work, or the stress/unhappiness of a negative workplace or job can lead to higher incidence of health problems among disengaged employees (Gallup, 2010). This would obviously have an adverse affect on employee sickness absence rates in an organisation which can massively affect profit and loss. Employees that are actively disengaged are twice as likely as those who are engaged to say they experienced regular anger at work. Workplace anger is a big concern, as it negatively affects productivity and can lead to aggressive behavior that puts employees at risk (Gallup, 2010). Engaged employees are seen to have lower levels of burnout, and are seen to benefit from good physical and mental health in comparison with disengaged employees (Johns and Ellis, 2016, p.85). However highly engaged employees are still at risk of burnout because they often work harder, take on more responsibility and to go the extra mile, this constant effort can lead to burnout (Hearne, 2019). Thus justifies why a committed employee wellbeing strategy should be a main factor in HRM strategy.

Safety Incidents- A study by Lockwood (2007, cited in Johns and Ellis, 2016, p.86) found that disengaged employees at a beverage company were 5 times more likely to have a health and safety incident at work.

Employee engagement: Recent studies

There are various recent studies that identify key trends and demographic in relation to EE. A CIPD (2009) UK study found that more women were engaged with work than men. Their recent Working Lives Survey also found that among low paid jobs, one in five women were low-paid compared with one in seven men (CIPD, 2020b). Here, I think organisations need to consider they ensure equal opportunities and fair treatment as it is an essential strand of a good engagement strategy as well as promoting a positive employer brand (MacLeod, and Clarke, 2009).

Respondents of the same survey stated that they were more likely to report their job affects their personal life rather than the other way around (CIPD, 2020b). Flexible working arrangements can help to support employees' work life balance as well as improve well-being as well as promoting a gender-balanced and diverse workforce (CIPD, 2019b). The main reasons for flexible work requests are caring responsibilities (especially for women) and increasing leisure time (especially for men) (CIPD, 2019b). Flexible working arrangements are more common among employees with disabilities, with the CIPD (2019b) reporting that it applies to two-thirds of these workers. Employees with disabilities can often be more disengaged as a result of discrimination in the workplace.

Children are also key drivers of the use of flexible working through reduced hours arrangements and job sharing. With 63% of women in the 35–44 age group reporting using flexible working arrangements such as term-time working (CIPD, 2019b).

The Working Lives Survey (2020b) also found that 12% of respondents had changed their job between 2019-2020. Job change is more common among younger workers and less common among older workers (CIPD, 2020b). In summary, workers are less likely to change jobs if they are engaged at work. The Millennial generation (born between 1980 and 1996) are renowned for 'job hopping' (Adkins, no date) as they are more likely to act if a better opportunity presents itself. A Gallup study found that only 29% of millennials are engaged at work, with 16% being actively disengaged (Gallup Inc, 2016). This could be because Millennials aren't rewards driven; they want a purpose and meaningful work therefore want to work for an organisation with a strong mission statement and values (Gallup Inc, 2016).

There are significant differences in engagement levels between different geographical areas. Research into engagement in the UK indicates that employee engagement levels amongst UK employees are stable but below the global average. The UK average engagement score was 45% with France being 54%, Australia 56% and the USA being 60% (Hearne, 2019). But why is the UK so disengaged? Purcell (2010) believes that the reporting could be to blame, while others cite burnout, work intensification and a lack of work life balance are to blame (Johns and Ellis, 2016).

93% of employees who work for third sector organisations are engaged as it is seen that they experience a higher sense of meaning when it comes to their work and so align with the company mission (Hearne, 2019). This also ties in the millennial generation stance of seeking meaningful work. In the public sector satisfaction with pay is low, with 13% reporting strong dissatisfaction compared with 9% of workers in other sectors (CIPD, 2019b).

In recent years we have seen an increase in the 'gig economy', which is defined as a free market where temporary positions are common and organisations hire independent workers for short-term commitments. This sort of work is insecure and is characterised by periods of temporary or reduced hours of work. Non-standard contracts will always remain an aspect of working life and they offer some employees flexibility they wish for, however for others it can have the opposite effect on performance. This is the result of a labour market in which flexibility is employer-driven rather than employee (CIPD, 2019b). Some gig workers (two in five) actually prefer it, with research finding that employers scored gig work higher than permanent employment on a number of important factors, including flexibility, ability to balance personal and family needs, enjoyment and control over workload (Yildirmaz and Klein, 2020). Apparently gig workers are more prepared to take deeper pay cuts, defer salaries and are more likely to work more unpaid overtime (Yildirmaz and Klein, 2020). Interestingly, research also indicates that contextual performance, which is the motivation to do tasks beyond core job role tasks, found that employees on non-standard contracts and the self-employed were more focused on their core tasks and less focused on extra-role activities than are permanent employees. (CIPD, 2020b).

The CIPD (2019b) found that underemployment is present among one in six workers with rates of underemployment being the highest among younger workers aged 18–34, with one in five reporting underemployment compared with only around 15% of middle age groups (CIPD, 2019b). This may be linked to the aforementioned patterns of non-standard employment among different age groups.

Conclusion

We can try to make various predictions about the future of EE based on current trends. Below are some key topics which I believe need to be considered for the future of employee engagement.

Redundancies

The UK is in recession as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Data produced by the CIPD (2020c) raises some key concerns for employees, including work–life balance, wellbeing and job security. In particular I foresee job security becoming a big engagement issue. The Office for National statistics (ONS, 2020) recently released figures on the unemployment rate and the number of redundancies, both continuing to increase since July 2020, while the employment rate continues to fall. Redundancies have reached their highest level since May 2009 (the last recession) (ONS, 2020). The fear of job loss is harmful to wellbeing (CIPD, 2020b) therefore it will be important for organisations to communicate clearly with their staff to set expectations or put minds at ease to keep staff engaged. Engaged employees will aid their organisations' efforts to survive and thrive in difficult times (Engage for Success, 2012).

Underemployment

Underemployment is when an employee is working fewer hours than they wish. Underemployment acts as a source of insecurity in the labour market and can have a knock on effect on financial status and living standards. The CIPD (2019b) found that underemployment is present among one in six workers, it is likely that this will only increase as organisations affected by the recession and the possibility of more lockdown restrictions will mean hours will need to be reduced.

Agile Working

As a result of COVID19 flexible working has taken off, with remote working becoming a necessity. 44% of employers now have official flexible working policies in place, an increase of 24% pre-COVID-19. Over half of respondents (54%) say they have felt pressure to come into work at some point during the pandemic (Yildirmaz and Klein, 2020). When offices fully re-open the health and safety of all workers will remain a top priority (Yildirmaz and Klein, 2020). We need to consider if some organisations will look to save money by reducing office space, especially if their teams have been just as productive and are happier working from

home. Flexibility of remote working has given some employees better work-life balance, greatly improved productivity and saved individuals money on lunches, work attire and commuting (BBC, 2020). There is also a positive environmental impact as a result of less people commuting. It is important for employers to consider individuals, a lot of people can find working from home convenient but lonely, they miss the social interaction, so offering giving individuals a choice or offering a combination of both home and office working will be the key to EE.

Health & Wellbeing-

In order to have effective EE organisations need to invest in employee health and well-being (CIPD, 2017). It is important to not only offer support packages to employees but to also promote health and wellbeing. ECD not only offers an employee assist programme but also promotes and encourages employees to look after their own health & wellbeing. One of the ways they do this is through a company cash plan benefit, where employees get full cashback for things like routine dental, eye and chiropractic appointments. This encourages people to look after themselves without the worry of financial implications. A healthy workforce is often a happy one (CIPD, 2014). Employee well-being at Google is a key engagement strategy. They invest in social activities and resources intended to foster a sense of belonging and a team culture. Google believes that creating the right culture will mean that employees will be proud to work for them and to go above and beyond, thus translating them to remaining a market leader (MacLeod and Clarke, 2009). We also need to look at supporting our employees in new ways, for example ensuring people feel part of virtual teams, that individuals can continue to develop their skills, or improving conditions for those working on the 'front line (Yildirmaz and Klein, 2020). Especially if our teams are to continue with remote working we need to try harder to engage our virtual teams.

In summary, engagement does not require complex initiatives or expensive investment, however it does need strong buy in and support of senior managers. It also needs to be delivered through their leadership, organisational vision and through engaging line managers (Purcell, 2010).

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