

Qualification: CIPD Diploma in Applied Human Resources

Module Name:

Understanding Employee Engagement

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By signing below, I confirm that the work/evidence presented is my own, unaided work. I understand the regulations pertaining to candidate malpractice and the action that may be taken as a result.

Signed:

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Duncan Hook', is written over a light grey rectangular background.

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1.

The dream engagement scenario for an employer is that employees automatically want to come to work and put in maximum effort. The idea is that when the team is engaged they will not need micro-management or control from their employer (Johns & Ellis, 2016, p. 80). Managers cannot and should not be standing over employees at all times to ensure they are sufficiently contributing. For many organisations, this was put to the test during the coronavirus pandemic as it took a change in management style to engage remote workers while based in an environment not normally conducive to work (Kewalramani, 2020).

The CIPD (Gifford & Young, 2021) subscribe to the idea that engaged individuals exhibit their engagement through certain behaviours. These include the energy or effort exhibited when working on an activity, the dedication or enthusiasm for seeing a task completed and an increase of concentration to the point of being wholly engrossed in their work.

While this explains the output of engagement for an employee, explaining what it actually means to be engaged is notoriously difficult to define. Something that all literary definitions agree on is that engagement is a psychological state for employees but the explanation of reaching this state can vary (Gifford & Young, 2021).

Kahn (1990) centred his research on engagement around the personal connection an individual can have with an activity or organisation. When someone is doing what they truly want to be doing then this is true personal expression. This happens most notably when someone's job also happens to be a hobby they are truly passionate about; Kahn's example being a scuba diving instructor he had observed excitedly engaging with their pupils (Kahn, 1990, pp. 700-701). This individual will show physical engagement through the effort they are putting into the activity, cognitive engagement because they are so engrossed in it and emotional engagement because they are personally invested in its success. At the other end of the scale, total disengagement would be an individual's reaction to being given a task or activity to complete that they have zero interest in.

A report from the CIPD (2012) offers a more relatable take on engagement. In addition to the type of personal or 'emotional engagement' described by Kahn (1990) they suggest that individuals exhibit "transactional engagement" (CIPD, 2012, p. 8) in that the employee knows a level of interest and enthusiasm is required by their employer. While they may say and appear to be fully engaged, they would easily sway if another opportunity arose (Johns & Ellis, 2016, p. 81). Their engagement is offered as part of their side of the commitment to the employment relationship (Colling & Terry, 2010).

Employee engagement is often conflated with other concepts that both feed from and into engagement despite having a different perspective on an employee's relationship with work (Gifford & Young, 2021).

Organisational commitment, like engagement, is also explained as a psychological state, although is more directed to the organisation itself and the way that the employee dedicates themselves to it (Johns & Ellis, 2016, p. 82). This connection can also be emotional or 'affective', such as the "love" employees feel for the big tech brands they work for (Ballmer, 2011). More often though, this commitment comes from the time spent in the organisation. With 'normative commitment', they may feel they owe something in return for the company's investment in their development or with 'continuance commitment' they may just be happy to stay with the organisation they know rather than risk the unknown (Johns & Ellis, 2016, p. 82).

The CIPD (CIPD, 2021, p. 5) point out that it is only employees who feel an emotional connection who actually 'want' to stay with the organisation because they are engaged with it while the other examples of commitment are born from necessity. In this sense, while it is argued that

organisational commitment is certainly a potential trigger for engagement (Johns & Ellis, 2016, p. 82), this is not guaranteed in all cases and so should be considered as a separate concept.

Engagement is also considered alongside job satisfaction; the measurement of how much an employee enjoys, feels valued or accomplishment from their job (Johns & Ellis, 2016, p. 82) which sounds like Kahn's idea of personal connection (Kahn, 1990, pp. 700-701).

However, while being "satisfied" with your job or work might mean you never complain but does not necessarily mean you would go the extra mile for it (Kruse, 2012). Acas (2014) note that job satisfaction is more often linked to the reward gained from employment whether remuneration, development or promotion. In this way, job satisfaction appears to be much more focused on the end goal, what the employee is going to get out of the work than at being emotionally invested in the task or responsibility. While reward is important in building engagement, it may be easier to see job satisfaction aligning with the more transactional form of employee engagement recognised by the CIPD (2012, p. 8).

2.

Although HR may be asked to work on an engagement strategy, success will come from a collaborative approach from everyone in the organisation (Pass, et al., 2018).

Management in particular are key in establishing trust with employees (Warren, 2017) as it has been found that even in organisations with overall high engagement there is still potential for variation of engagement levels dependent on line manager (Taylor, 2016, pp. 202-203). Through a whole business approach, the aim is not to force engagement through activities but rather build trust, aim to understand employees and support them to establish a workplace that stimulates engagement (Timms, 2019).

MacLeod in 2009 described four factors that help foster engagement for the whole organisation to embrace (MacLeod & Clarke, 2009, p. 33). Each of these "enablers of engagement" is explored below to outline the roles that different parties play in driving engagement.

Engagement is often felt when the individual has a personal connection with their job (Kahn, 1990) which is difficult in large business when most employees do not have a financial or familial stake in their organisation. Successes, failures and opportunities; employees should be given as much information as possible about the direction of the organisation to ensure they feel a part of it (Johns & Ellis, 2016, p. 83).

An important outcome of improved communication is the development of trust. Employees who trust their employer are more satisfied in their job and more likely to recommend working there as a company they are proud to be a part of (Sanders, 2012).

While senior leadership can affect trust through transparency, line managers have a key role in ensuring direct reports can see how the work they do contributes to the success of the business (Johns & Ellis, 2016, p. 83).

As an extension of the transparency from leadership, encouraging employees to have a voice in how the organisation is run will help them feel engaged (Maxwell, 2021). Employees who have interest in the organisation when hired want to have a hand in its success and to know that their opinion is heard and valued (MacLeod, 2015).

Enabling employee voice can be a difficult for senior leaders in that they need to relinquish control to allow employees shape their own careers (Sanders, 2012). However, by opening up two-way

conversation between leaders and employees, it sends a message of trust to employees that is hoped to be reciprocated (Maxwell, 2021).

HR can also support the introduction of measures that enable this two-way communication to happen regularly without feeling forced. The CIPD (Hope-Hailey, et al., 2012) found that overly formalising this process can negatively affect trust as can an introduction of “fun” activities which do not address key issues which concern the team (Sparrow, 2018). Employees find much more satisfaction in shaping their career when given the freedom to do this informally with their manager rather than forums or surveys, which are viewed with an air of suspicion (Hope-Hailey, et al., 2012). B&Q, who have been seen as a world leader on employee engagement, introduced an informal morning briefing with all staff with the opportunity to raise issues in the moment (Gallup, 2003). Managers would then act on feedback and suggestions and dedicate subsequent morning meetings to solve these issues.

The line manager role in fostering engagement with their teams is through the support they offer, through inspiration, recognition or supporting wellbeing (Johns & Ellis, 2016, p. 93).

Managers who are successful in both supporting and engaging direct reports are taking the time to know and understand them as individuals (MacLeod, 2015). This is supported by coaching techniques that are more focussed on asking questions rather than dictating. Through understanding how individuals are motivated in work whether intrinsically from the work itself or extrinsically for what they will get out of completing a task (Gifford & Young, 2021) it becomes more achievable to find work that will both stimulate them and aligns with the organisations goals.

Management confidence in this process is not always there. HR can support by ensuring consistency in performance and coaching processes through management training and a structure (Sanders, 2012).

Wellbeing is also essential for staff to give their best at work (Guest, 2019). Increasingly, good wellbeing programmes are seen as more important for engagement than reward as they help create a positive and healthy experience so that even if work is tough employees feel supported (Deloitte, 2018).

HR also play a large part in ensuring the culture of the organisation is supportive of employees. Through monitoring absence levels, ensuring managers are catering to employee needs and that relationships are healthy, HR teams see the overall picture and potential correlations between wellbeing and absence levels, which could indicate disengagement (Sparrow, 2018). HR and leadership can work in collaboration to ensure work-life balance and mental health are supported through organisation wide policies and procedures such as a transparent approach to flexible working (Guest, 2019).

An organisation’s values are central to their employer brand with personal connection again important. If the values of the organisation align with the employee’s own then they are much more likely to feel a commitment to the employer and overall strategy (Gifford & Young, 2021).

It is not enough for an organisation to create an inspirational mantra to engage employees, leadership need to walk the talk and the values need to be displayed across the organisation (MacLeod, 2015) to encourage trust.

One of the ways that Satya Nadella turned around Microsoft was by making culture the priority and displaying the organisation’s values with employees (London, 2018).

Ensuring the values come to life also require an underpinning of policies and behaviours that HR can outline and develop. B&Q achieved this through their value statements. These five statements that not only help to inspire and clarify the sort of people and customer centric business they are, but are in themselves behaviours expected from employees (Johns & Ellis, 2016, pp. 94-95).

3.

Having an engaged workforce has multiple documented benefits to businesses including increase in company profits, more output from work, more efficient working as well as better health and safety for employees (Johns & Ellis, 2016, p. 85). A large-scale study from the Gallup organisation found that organisations with high engagement had on average an additional \$80k to \$120k of monthly revenue when compared to companies who struggled to engage staff.

Central to these benefits is the concept of 'discretionary effort' displayed when employees exhibit additional effort, time or focus into their work because they are personally motivated to do so. The 2003 'black box studies' from Bath University (Taylor, 2016, pp. 201-202) found that organisations with high job satisfaction coupled with values which were brought to life through policies and management example, were displaying the most discretionary effort (Purcell, et al., 2003, pp. 37-38).

While studies by Gallup have found a correlation between high engagement and business results or retention (Taylor, 2016, pp. 202-203), multiple sources have questioned whether the cause and effect of these results have been misinterpreted. It is equally possible for an organisation who is performing well to be able to afford to make investments in initiatives that will improve engagement (Marchington, et al., 2016). There is also the idea that people like being part of a winning team. They are more likely to feel invested if they have the job security and sense of satisfaction of working for a high performing organisation (Johns & Ellis, 2016, p. 87).

Engagement also has a reported people based benefit, not just for employees but also for customers. Improved engagement is often paired with improved retention of staff as exhibited in examples that have improved employee experience or better utilised the skills of the workforce (Baska, 2019).

A study from Hutchinson and Purcell in 2003 (Johns & Ellis, 2016, p. 86) looked at Tesco stores to track the benefits of engagement activities from management. Staff at Tesco were overall reliant on management direction to respond to customer needs, for example, opening additional checkouts when it was busy. One manager found that by shifting responsibility to staff and giving them the autonomy to decide when they needed to change task, they were far more in tune with what was happening in the store and more satisfied with the work they were doing as a result. This was also impactful on customers who were having their needs met much more efficiently.

Customers are more likely to recommend a business that has engaged employees, and in turn, the employees are more inclined to recommend working there to others (Johns & Ellis, 2016, p. 85). Research from the CIPD in 2010 (Alfes, et al.) detailed results from surveying ServiceCo, a business solutions partner supporting public sector organisations. This organisation had very high levels of engagement with over 80% of staff declaring themselves 'strongly engaged' with their work and sharing how much they "cared" about the work they did even staying late to ensure a job was finished. A significant result of this level of engagement was a high degree of advocacy including within families with father and son working together in one team (Alfes, et al., 2010, p. 10). Having a reputation as an employer who is so good you would recommend to close family and friends shows that engagement can equally be beneficial to employer brand (Johns & Ellis, 2016, p. 85).

Despite, the benefits described, there are arguments against the idea that engagement has a large part to play in delivering results (Leach, et al., 2018). Engagement should not be seen as the ultimate goal as very high engagement can actually be damaging to productivity. The easiest way to see this is when comparing engagement in work with personal passions as Kahn (1990) did. There is no denying that people find hobbies engaging but enjoying and savouring work is not necessarily conducive to finishing a task (Leach, et al., 2018). There are also some individuals who are committed to their job,

perhaps for the good of their customers, but do not have the same level of commitment towards the organisation (Robertson, 2012). At the other end of the scale are employees who take personal passion and discretionary effort too far and burn out as a result. While effectively self-employed and earning large amounts of money working on their 'dream job', video game streamers have found that it is very easy for that passion and work to take over their lives and lead to pressure on their mental health (MacDonald, 2021). In a business setting, this again points to effective management of teams to achieve results. Understanding how teams are motivated and how they work together (Goyette, 2016) in addition to developing skills and improving culture appear to be effective methods for gaining benefits from engagement while focussing on what employees need to perform (Leach, et al., 2018).

4.

As difficult as it is for academics to consistently define employee engagement, it so follows that measuring and evidencing it is also difficult (Gifford & Young, 2021). Any quantitative data from surveys or questionnaires needs to be accompanied by and compared to qualitative data gathered from interviews or focus groups to flesh out the responses with specific feedback (Gifford & Young, 2021). Systems such as Employee Net Promoter Score, which focus specifically on gauging data on employee likelihood of recommending the employer to others (Medallia, 2022); still require context as an employee may think others will align with the values or enjoy the perks of working there but do not necessarily engage with the work itself.

Also important are the questions being asked of employees. Asking an employee outright if they are engaged can lead to unreliable responses from people attempting to give the 'right' answer (Johns & Ellis, 2016, pp. 88-89). The CIPD recommend the 'Utrecht Work Engagement Scale', which focusses on three questions that together give a picture of engagement: whether the employee is energised by their work, whether they feel enthusiasm and whether they are immersed in the work they do (Gifford & Young, 2021).

Through their own research, Gallup developed the Q12 index of 12 elements gauge engagement and the positive impact for the business (Gallup, 2021). Questionnaires or interviews based on this give a good indication of how employees feel about the employer and their career at the organisation. Although organisations can survey or run questionnaires for their teams it is important that the questions and results work in the context of the organisation and what engagement means for them (Johns & Ellis, 2016, pp. 88-89). NHS Scotland utilised their 'iMatter' engagement index which ran in stages ensuring that data collected was relevant to the current state and action plans reacted specifically to the data gathered (Pass, et al., 2018).

5.

The world of work is rapidly changing; particularly in the last two years of the global pandemic when personal priorities and what it means to be engaged have changed (CIPD, 2021) so, it is valuable to look at how engagement trends too have changed.

A 2018 ONS study on 'job quality' in the UK looked at possible indicators of happiness in jobs which were well paid, had good working hours and contract status (Office for National Statistics, 2018). This found that 69% of women were in so-called 'quality work' over men who were in 65%. As an indicator of engagement, this trend has continued from 2010 when women showed more engagement than men (Johns & Ellis, 2016, p. 87). There are indications that this is not a universal

truth, especially in the top jobs where the gender pay gap is still a problem (CIPD, 2021) and is likely to be a hindrance to future engagement scores if not addressed (Tracey, 2017).

The ONS study also found that educational and ethnic background were influential on achieving job quality (Office for National Statistics, 2018). Employees from white, Indian and Chinese backgrounds were more likely to be in the happier jobs overall with the possession of degree level education also being a factor. Gallup have found in the past (Johns & Ellis, 2016, p. 88) that age and long tenure can lead to disengagement with a job. The 2019 working lives survey (CIPD, 2019, p. 9) found that this issue is still fed by a lack of personal development and career opportunities for older employees. In the past, the CIPD have found that those with flexible working were more emotionally engaged and more inclined to promote their organisation as a result (Johns & Ellis, 2016, p. 87). The most recent working lives survey from the CIPD (2021) highlights flexibility as a necessary focus for engaging with employees in the future. With 41% of employees anxious about returning to the workplace after two years of homeworking through the pandemic, there is a need to ensure that trust is promoted through open communication about relevant concerns while ensuring that flexibility is discussed with options available (CIPD, 2021).

6.

Although difficult to define and not solely responsible for the benefits attributed to it (Briner, 2014), the concept of enthusing individuals about their work and the organisation undoubtedly has a place in a future where personal choice is becoming more important for current and potential employees (Jacobs, 2021).

The near future is likely characterised by the fallout from the pandemic. The new normal of homeworking will undoubtedly have an impact on how organisations approach engagement in the future. With a large number of staff stating they would prefer to work from home, large organisations such as Microsoft have conducted research (Teevan, et al., 2021) into how this will work for them. They have identified that around 25% of their workforce is considering leaving the company when the pandemic has eased. They have concluded in studies that trust and empowerment of staff working remotely is essential for them to keep staff engaged and ultimately keep staff in their employ (Teevan, et al., 2021). Retention of staff is sure to be a big concern for the near future for many employers, due to the 'great resignation' and the continuing tight labour market (Magdani, 2022). Employers will be looking at retention initiatives and although money might be the first thought, employers are expected to continue the trend of flexibility with more options for employees to balance work and life (CIPD, 2020).

While these solutions address the retention of employees, the purpose of engaging employees is also to energise, inspire and promote discretionary effort to improve performance (Purcell, et al., 2003, pp. 37-38). Change is undoubtedly unsettling and affects engagement (Johns & Ellis, 2016, p. 93) and many organisations, while adapting to change, have not always been able to bring staff along at the same time. Although employees have proven that they can effectively work from home (Newman, 2021), the connection with managers over the last two years has suffered. For engagement to thrive through this time, employers need to reconnect with their teams as MacLeod described (2009, p. 33) and encourage participation as well as participating in direct reports development in turn.

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