

Employee engagement - a work in progress?

Employee engagement has all the hallmarks of the latest management fad. Big consultancies are getting involved and publishing research to say that it's not happening; business gurus are writing books on how to achieve it; and there's a variety of definitions of what it actually is.

At a recent mindstretch, facilitated by communication and management consultancy fe₃, a selection of invited HR professionals were invited to examine what engagement is, what it means, and how to measure it.

There's little doubt that management believes engagement is important - it's been linked to a variety of organisational benefits from retention and improved customer satisfaction, to increased profits - and the latter tends to concentrate the mind.

There also seems to be little doubt that many employers aren't arranging work so that employees are engaged by their jobs. An article in the FT last year quoted research from YouGov which reported that only half (51%) of employees feel fully engaged by their company. This was no small scale sample, either - it surveyed 40,000 employees in all sectors and at all levels of the economy. The survey also reported that less than two thirds, or 63% felt loyal to their employer, with an even smaller number (51%) believing that their employer deserved any loyalty.

Our group felt that there was quite a lot about the idea of engagement which is very familiar. The willingness to go "the extra mile" harks back to the concept of discretionary behaviour, itself seen as an outcome of commitment. Engaged employees desire to stay with the organisation and feel proud to tell people who they work for, and produce better job performance - and these are also outcomes of commitment, a much older and well-researched organisational construct.

There's some debate that engagement is more emotionally charged than either commitment or job satisfaction - that engagement makes employees enthusiastic, vigorous and wholehearted. The Institute of Employment Studies believes that engagement requires a knowledge of the business context to enable employees to make changes that will improve the organisation and that engagement is *two way*. Like the psychological contract, engagement can be broken by the employer.

Interestingly, although it's included in most of the academic research, none of the consultancy research we considered appears to look at the antithesis to engagement, which is burnout.

Burnout, according to academic researchers is characterised by exhaustion, cynicism and reduced professional efficacy. However, even among the academic community, not everyone agrees that burnout is the exact opposite of engagement. Some see engagement and burnout as related, but essentially different concepts.

The difference in approach has some important ramifications for organisations looking to measure engagement. Use one survey designed with engagement and burnout as opposite ends of the same continuum and low scores mean employees are on their way to burnout; use another which has engagement and burnout as different concepts and low scores mean that your employees are merely not engaged. The health and safety implications of the latter are a lot less frightening than the former.

As the idea of engagement is not yet universally agreed, either among academics or consultancies, it's not surprising that the measurements of the concept also

differ - in some cases quite considerably. While a diagnosis called the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES) focuses on personal feelings at work, the IES engagement measure looks at the actions engaged employees take. Yet another measure, developed by Gallup looks at what the employee has experienced in the workplace in terms of recognition, praise, and having the right resources to do their job.

All of these have been tested with high levels of responses, and refined and validated; they all claim to measure engagement. But *which* engagement? And what are the lead indicators for the concept?

According to the UWES, the predictors of engagement are elements which again, look awfully familiar. The elements of job autonomy, task variety and performance feedback which are said to be indicators bear an uncanny resemblance to the job characteristics model developed by Hackman and Oldham, the outcomes of which are intrinsic motivation, job satisfaction and work effectiveness.

For the IES, the most important predictor of engagement is “feeling valued and involved”. Thus if the organisation has managers who care about employees, keep them informed, treat them fairly and encourage them to perform, are interested in their career and support them in training and development opportunities, give them opportunities to voice their views and are fair in pay and benefits - then you’re well on the way to helping employees feeling valued and involved. Which, according to the research done by IES, then leads to engagement.

But the concept of engagement is far from clear cut, and the variety of definitions, different predictors and measurements demonstrate its complexity.

In addition, if you think that the above look like a list of good HR practices exhorted by management writers for the past ten years - you’d be in agreement with our discussion group. They concluded that the concepts of engagement as they currently stood were still too broad, and overlapped with too many other constructs, such as commitment, the psychological contract and even the elements of job design. This led to concerns about the measurements.

And indeed, you might think that as so many of the predictors of engagement could be labelled as best management practice, you could save yourself the bother of measuring a concept for which there isn’t a concrete definition - and just implement the best practice instead.

912 words

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