

Engagement - summary of evidence

Summary

Despite employee engagement gaining much popularity over the past three decades, there is still no consensus as to what employee engagement is and how it should be defined (Shuck and Wollard, 2010). One of the most commonly used definitions in the academic literature however, is the one provided by Schaufeli and colleagues (e.g. Schaufeli and Bakker 2004) which suggests that employee engagement is *“A positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind that is characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption”* (Schaufeli and Bakker, 2004, p. 295). In contrast to academics, HR practitioners tend to define employee engagement in terms of organisational outcomes such as intention to stay or work place advocacy (Lewis et al. 2012).

The different theoretical perspectives of employee engagement also differ between scholars. One of the most popular and commonly used models to understand employee engagement is the Job-Demands Resources model (Schaufeli and Bakker, 2004). This model proposes that organisational (e.g. leadership support; career advancement) and personal resources (e.g. optimism; self-efficacy) help to drive employee engagement and decrease negative psychological states (e.g. stress, strain and burnout symptoms).

The positive effects of employee engagement are well established, both at the organisational and individual level. Employee engagement at the organisational level has been associated with an increase in; profitability and revenue (Schuck and Wollard, 2010; Robertson-Smith, 2009); customer satisfaction and loyalty (Engage for Success, 2016); employee productivity and discretionary effort (Gloforce, 2016, Tower Watson, 2012) and intention to stay (Lee et al. 2017). At the individual level, employees who are engaged are more likely to feel; a sense of achievement and accomplishment (Gloforce, 2016, Tower Watson, 2012); safe, happy and healthy (GOV, 2016a; Robertson-Smith and Markwick, 2009; Schuck and Wollard, 2010); and a sense of belonging (GOV, 2016b).

Recent evidence from international practitioner literature (AON Hewitt, 2017) has suggested that the average global engagement score is 63%, with Latin America being in the lead at 75%, whereas Europe is in the bottom at 58%. Although Brexit could play a part in the low score as implied by a

decline in engagement scores across a number of Western European EU countries since the announcement, the UK has increased slightly since the preceding report from the previous year.

Employee engagement is a complex phenomenon and as such, a wide range of factors relating to various aspects of organisational life have been identified as drivers. These include senior leaders (Knight et al. 2017); management (CIPD, 2012); support from colleagues (Schaufeli and Bakker, 2004); career progression (AON, 2013); organisational culture and climate (SHRM, 2016); employee voice and influence (CIPD, 2010). Hindrance of employee engagement (or employee disengagement) has been understood to occur either due to a lack of adequate, relevant resources or due to the presence of active barriers, for instance; supervisor and colleague incivility (Schaufeli and Bakker, 2004); work place bullying (Engage for Success, 2017b); poor work practices (CIPD, 2010) and job insecurity (Robertson-Smith, 2009).

The only known systematic literature review (Knight et al., 2017) on the effectiveness of employee engagement interventions found a small, yet positive effect on the increase in engagement scores following the interventions. In contrast, evidence presented in the practitioner literature, points to interventions having a much greater impact on engagement than implied by their academic counterparts. This could perhaps in part be due to differences in method, whereby practitioners appeared to have used a more targeted approach to action planning and implementation.

What is employee engagement?

Employee engagement has gained considerable attention from HRD scholars, organisational psychologists, researchers and practitioners over the past three decades, with clear evidence for the positive organisational and individual outcomes for engaged employees. (Shuck and Wollard, 2010).

Despite its popularity, there is currently no consensus among organisational scholars and HR practitioners alike, as to what employee engagement is and how it should be defined (Lewis et al. 2012; Lee et al. 2017). Below are some of the most commonly used definitions in the literature:

“the harnessing of organization members’ selves to their work roles; in engagement, people employ and express themselves physically, cognitively, and emotionally during role performances” (Kahn, 1990, p. 694)

“A persistent, positive affective-motivational state of fulfillment in employees that is characterized by

high levels of activation and pleasure”(Maslach et al., 2001, p. 417).

“A positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind that is characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption”(Schaufeli and Bakker, 2004, p, 295)

Whereas academics tend to define employee engagement in terms of psychological states, HR professionals and consultancies tend to define it in relation to tangible organisational outcomes such as intention to stay, workplace advocacy (recommending the organisation as a good place to work, recommending services or products provided) and discretionary effort (willingness to go the extra mile) (Lewis et al. 2012).

Theories of employee engagement

In the same way that there are differences in how employee engagement is defined by academics, the theories and models used to conceptualise employee engagement also differ. This section will focus on three different perspectives presented by Kahn, Maslach & Leiter and Schaufeli and colleagues.

Kahn (1990) was the first author to write about employee engagement and laid the foundation for any subsequent related work in the field. He proposed that individual employee engagement consists of three domains which need to be fulfilled in order for an employee to be fully engaged; *meaningfulness* (the positive “sense of return on investments of self in role performance”. p. 705); *Safety* (the ability to show one’s self “without fear or negative consequences to self image, status, or career” p. 705); *Availability* “sense of possessing the physical, emotional, and psychological resources necessary, p. 705).

A second perspective was proposed by Maslach and Leiter in the latter part of the 1990’s. As such, they suggested that employee engagement consists of three components which are the direct opposites of burnout; energy, involvement and efficacy (Maslach and Leiter, 1997)

The third perspective, proposed by Schaufeli and colleagues (e.g. Schaufeli and Bakker 2004) has directly challenged Maslach and Leiter’s position. According to their perspective, employee engagement and burnout are two separate constructs which are weakly to moderately and negatively correlated (sharing 10-25% of the variance). According to their view, employees do not need to be burnt out to experience disengagement. They have come to understand employee engagement as consisting of three dimensions all which are centred on different types of energy; vigor (physical

energy), absorption (cognitive energy) and dedication (emotional energy). Schaufeli and colleagues' perspective was supported by Byrne et al. (2016) when more closely examining employee engagement as a construct.

Based on these insights, Schaufeli and Bakker (2004) proposed a key conceptual framework to understand how employee engagement occurs; the Job-Demands Resources Model which advocates that work engagement is driven by job and personal resources. In this context, job resources are physical, social or organisational aspects often measured through for instance access feedback, social support and development opportunities; whereas personal resources refer to self-esteem, self-efficacy and optimism. In addition to aiding work engagement, these can also buffer stress and strain experiences in response to job demands. According to recent literature reviews of the employee engagement literature (Carasco et al. 2015; Knight et al. 2017; Lee et al. 2017), Schaufeli's operationalisation of engagement is among the most widely used.

Why is employee engagement important?

Evidence from both the academic and practitioner literature suggests that employee engagement has a positive and significant effect on both the organisation and the individual employee.

The importance of employee engagement at the organisational level:

- Profitability and revenue (Schuck and Wollard, 2010; Robertson-Smith and Markwick, 2009)
- Protection on the bottom-line profit when the local or global economy is in recession (Robertson-Smith, 2009)
- Increased customer service, satisfaction and loyalty (Engage for Success, 2017a)
- Employee productivity and discretionary effort (Gloforce, 2016, Tower Watson, 2012)
- Improved teamwork and climate (GOV, 2016b)
- Innovation (CIPD, 2010)
- Lower turnover levels/higher intention to stay (Lee et al. 2017; Schaufeli and Bakker, 2004)
- Organisation being recommended as a great place to work (Tower Watson, 2012)
- Services/products being recommended (Engage for success, 2017a)

The importance of employee engagement at the individual level:

- Sense of achievement and feelings of accomplishment (Gloforce, 2016, Tower Watson, 2012)
- Sense of safety, health/wellbeing and happiness (GOV, 2016a, Robertson-Smith, 2009; Schuck and Wollard, 2010)
- Pride in working for the organisation (Tower Watson, 2012)
- Sense of belonging (GOV, 2016b)
- Lower levels of absence and sickness (Engage for Success, 2017a, GOV, 2016a)
- Work engagement help build personal resources in the form of self-efficacy, self-esteem and optimism (Xanthopoulou et al. 2009a)

Engagement and job satisfaction levels in the workplace

Employee engagement data which has been collected across the world suggests that more can generally be done to create a more engaged workforce.

One recent report published by AON Hewitt in 2017, containing five million employee responses from 1000 organisations globally, suggested that the average global engagement score is 63%. In this particular study, Latin America achieved the highest engagement score of 75%, whereas Europe achieved the lowest score of 58% (which was a 2% decline from the previous year). The authors hypothesised that Britain leaving the EU could be one of the drivers of the relatively low score, as a number of specific Western European EU countries all had seen decreases in scores with 5 % points or more. This trend was not observed for the UK however, which achieved a slight increase (+1% point) from the previous year.

The CIPD also released a report in 2017 which surveyed 2200 UK employees on job satisfaction and aspects of employee engagement. Findings from this report revealed a UK net job satisfaction score of 48%, which was a +3 increase in comparison to the previous year. Results from this study also suggested that employees in the public sector are more engaged than the ones in the private sector, as indicated by different measures of work motivation and effort.

Drivers of work engagement

Experts in the field of employee engagement (e.g. Robertson-Smith, 2009) have pointed out that there is considerable variation in what drives employee engagement. This is very much reflected in the evidence presented in this resource hub, as drivers will vary depending on the report and the variables investigated. Robertson-Smith (2009) cited Robinson et al's (2004) previous study when summarising these tendencies:

- There is no simple pulling of one or two levers to raise engagement levels. No 'one size fits all approach' will be effective, as levels of engagement and its drivers will depend on the organisation, employee population, individual differences and the nature of work itself.
- There is no definite, all encompassing purpose list of engagement drivers. Employee engagement is likely to be influenced by many interrelated factors.

Drawing on the principles of the Job Demands resources framework and the evidence presented, however, it is possible to broadly think of how certain clusters of resources relating to the organisation and job design have been found to positively impact on employee engagement. These are listed below.

- **Senior Leadership** –Transformational leadership, characterised by for instance inspirational

motivation and intellectual stimulation, has been found to be a particularly potent leadership style (Lee et al. 2017; Knight et al. 2017). Evidence from the practitioner literature also mirrored this, although it generally put much greater emphasis on leadership competencies relating to managing the business effectively (e.g. making rational, data-driven decisions and being effective at growing the business) than academics did (Tower Watson, 2012; 2014).

- **Management** – Line manager behaviours were also found to have a great impact on work engagement, particularly the ones relating to the following competencies; effective two-way communication; direction and managing performance; being personable, caring and available; acting with integrity and recognising and rewarding efforts (Lewis et al. 2012; Engage for success, 2011; Tower Watson, 2014).
- **Team/peer support** – Ex: Support from colleagues; positive team climate; colleagues living the values; being committed to delivering high quality work (Lee et al. 2017; Schuafeli and Bakker, 2004; Xanthopoulou et al. 2009b).
- **Job characteristics/resources** – Ex: Autonomy; person-job fit; meaningful work; clear expectations and job goals/objectives; adequate resources/tools to perform job well; performance feedback (CIPD, 2010; Crawford et al. 2017, GOV, 2016b ,Xanthopoulou et al. 2009b)
- **Career progression, development and training** – Ex: Adequate training for the job role; professional development; career progression (AON, 2013; SHRM, 2016)
- **Organisational culture and climate** – Ex: Authentic corporate culture; corporate social responsibility; integrity in business operations; positive organisational climate (CIPD, 2010; Globeforce, 2016; SHRM, 2016)
- **Communication** – Ex. Effective, streamlined communication adapted to the target audience on change and issues that directly affect employees (Engage for success, 2017a; McKoy-Beckett, 2013)
- **Employee voice and influence** – Ex. Opportunities for input into decision affecting employees; employees being consulted over work places issues; employee suggestions and ideas mattering (AON, 2013; CIPD, 2010)
- **Health and wellbeing** -, Ex. Adequate work-life balance and recovery, manageable stress levels at work, zero tolerance for bullying or discrimination (Crawford et al. 2017; GOV, 2016a; Tower Watson, 2012;)
- **Reward and recognition** – Adequate reward (pay and salary, bonus and benefits) and non-monetary recognition and appreciation for work efforts; job security (Crawford et la. 2017; Globeforce, 2017)

Barriers to engagement

In the same way as there are conditions which must be met in order for employee engagement to flourish, there are also certain factors which inhibit employee engagement. These can primarily be understood as a) the lack of necessary resources, b) barriers which actively disrupt employee engagement.

Lack of necessary resources:

Research has found links between the lack of the following resources and disengagement:

- **Senior Leaders** – Ex. Ineffective leadership; lack of trust in leaders; lack of clear vision and values (Engage for success, 2017)
- **Management** – Ex. Overall poor line management; lack of interpersonal skills (CIPD, 2010)
- **Team/peer support** – Ex. Working in silos (Engage for success, 2017b)
- **Job characteristics/resources** - Ex. Abstract/unclear work objectives; stressful jobs with little flexibility or autonomy; repetitive work with few breaks and short cycle time (e.g. call centre work); role conflict and overload; low levels of accountability and ownership (CIPD, 2010; Crawford et al. 2017; Robertson-Smith, 2009)

Active barriers to work engagement:

- **Unsupportive social relationships** – Ex. Supervisor and colleague incivility (Schaufeli and Bakker, 2004)
- **Workplace bullying** – Ex. Carried out by managers and colleagues (Engage for Success, 2017b; Robertson-Smith, 2009)
- **Inefficient work practices** – Dissatisfaction with appraisal processes; ineffective decision-making processes; ineffective, disjointed IT systems (CIPD, 2010)
- **Job insecurity** (Robertson-Smith, 2009)

What to consider when designing and implementing an employee engagement programme

Pre-programme considerations

At the very earliest stages of the design process, consider the purpose of the employee engagement programme and what you would like to achieve by the end of it. Also make sure that the engagement programme is as impactful as possible, by incorporating data and evidence from different sources (Briner et al. 2009):

- **Practitioner expertise and judgment** - This could include interviews with senior leaders or managers about their experiences in the organisation
- **Stakeholder preference or values** - The stakeholders can vary depending on the problem and stage in the design of the engagement programme. Senior leaders may be consulted for input early on the questionnaire design process whereas lower levels employees could be consulted as part of employee validation panels at the latter stages of the process
- **Context, local evidence** – Align the programme and questionnaire to the overall corporate strategy, vision and values (Wiley, 2012). Also review and bear other HR initiatives in mind such as leadership programmes, reward systems etc. in the design process.
- **Evaluated external evidence** – for example, academic or practitioner research from organisations with comparable problems.

An effective communication strategy is key when it comes to supporting a successful engagement

programme. Let your employees know well in advance that an employee engagement survey will be launched.

Implementation considerations

An engagement programme should not be seen as an HR specific project, but as a company-wide initiative. It should therefore be championed at every level of the organisation, starting with senior leaders at the top, going all the way down to engagement champions at the lower levels. Managers can support the implementation by encouraging and giving the team the necessary time to take the survey. Communicate response rates throughout to drive responses.

Post-implementation considerations

Once the engagement survey has closed, communicate the overall response rates and high level results. At this stage, focus should be on identifying and prioritising key areas to action and subsequent action plans. Remember, the engagement survey is only the starting point – it is what happens off the back of the results which drive improvement and change! Communicate action plans as part of mid-term and implemented actions as part of long-term communications. Tie any improvement or positive changes back to the results of the survey to help drive response rates in the future.

Evaluate the effectiveness of the engagement project by tracking progress (for instance by measuring engagement year on year) and measuring success (for instance, positive changes in customer satisfaction scores, attrition rates or impact on the bottom line). An engagement programme should not be treated as a one-off exercise, but as a continuous and evolving project.

Employee engagement interventions

To date, there has been very little academic literature which has sought to evaluate the effectiveness of employee engagement interventions. So far, there only appears to be one paper which recently was published on the topic. Knight and colleagues (2017) carried out a systematic literature review with meta-analysis and identified twenty studies which included four types of potentially engagement enhancing interventions; a) personal resource building (e.g. developing self-efficacy; resilience and optimism); b) job resource building (e.g. autonomy, social support and feedback); c) leadership training (used to increase knowledge and skills), d) health promotion (involves encouraging employees to adopt and sustain healthier lifestyles and reduce stress). The findings from the analysis, suggested that the overall effect of the interventions on employee engagement, was small, but positive. With regards to intervention type effectiveness, no difference in effect size were observed between the intervention types on work engagement.

The authors highlighted that there were certain limitations which may have had a confounding influence on the effect size. 1) Meta-analyses are not able to control for differences in how well interventions are implemented and attended by participants who are motivated to take part. Previous research (e.g. Nielsen et al. 2007) has demonstrated that implementation and participant buy-in is important to the overall success of the intervention; 2) The variable and sometimes poor response (18-94%) and attrition rates (5-88%) could negatively have impacted the generalisability of the findings; 3) Some of the sample sizes were small, potentially below the threshold of detecting a significant effect; 4) some interventions were implemented during unfavourable times such as during organisational restructuring, corporate merging, redundancy, job insecurity etc.; 5) It is unclear to what extent these interventions were implemented following a needs analysis or whether they simply were implemented due to there being a theoretical rationale for its efficacy.

The interventions from the practitioner literature included in this hub have been associated with greater impact on engagement. For instance, case studies (GOV, 2016a;b) on UK job centres which were carried out on the initiative taken by the government, found that engagement scores increased remarkably between 31% and 39% following targeted interventions. This could potentially, at least, in part be attributed to using a different method. The common denominators for these studies were analysing the data from the Civil Service People Survey and identifying the factors (whether it be lack of resources or the presence of active barriers) which contributed to disengagement and taking action to address them.

Individual tools

Most of the evidence, whether it be academic or practitioner, on employee engagement has focused on job design elements, leadership, management, peer support and organisational resources and processes. Much less research has been dedicated to the individual and the role personal resources may play in fostering employee engagement. The scarce, but promising literature which currently exists on the topic has primarily been concerned with organisation-based self-esteem (OBSE), self-efficacy, and optimism (Xanthopoulou et al. 2009a;b).

Although at least one previous study (Xanthopoulou et al. 2009b): has proposed that these personal resources may play a mediating role between certain organisational resources (autonomy, team climate and supervisory coaching) and employee engagement, there is additional evidence to suggest that employees may be able to build some of these resources within themselves using Cognitive Behavioural Therapy based tools.

Management tools

Evidence presented from both the academic and practitioner literature has shown that leaders and managers play pivotal roles in driving employee engagement. Although most of this evidence comes

from academic literature which broadly describes favourable leadership styles (such as transformational leadership) or practitioner reports and case studies which isolate certain advantageous behaviours; one resource published by Lewis et al. (2012) used a very rigorous approach to developing a behavioural framework for managers.

According to this study, a set of themes break down into competencies with corresponding behavioural indicators which can help drive engagement. These themes with related competencies are:

- **Supporting employee growth** – Autonomy and empowerment; development; feedback, praise and recognition
- **Interpersonal style and integrity** – Individual interest, availability, personal manner, ethics
- **Monitoring direction** – Reviewing and guiding; clarifying expectations; managing time and resources; following processes and procedures.

Organisational tools

Most of the literature, whether it be academic or practitioner, tends to focus on employee engagement from an organisational point of view, particularly with regards to job design and the structural resources available. As employee engagement is complex and driven by many factors related to organisational culture, climate, processes and development opportunities, organisations ought to take a holistic, yet evidence-based and planned approach to their employee engagement programme. Despite this, previous research has suggested that many organisations carry out their activity in a relatively ad hoc manner, without serious consideration of the business case or fit against organisational and individual needs. In addition, across sectors, organisations often expend a great deal of effort and resource, without systematic evaluation of impact and effectiveness (Shutler Jones, 2011).

To combat this, Shutler Jones (2011) provided a practical checklist with crucial questions to consider:

Key considerations when planning and designing the intervention

- Have you taken into account the decision making process?
- Have you identified key stakeholders?
- Have you been clear about what you want to achieve including the financial benefits?
- Have you planned realistic timescales for implementation?
- How will you actively promote your intervention to your target audience?

Key areas to consider when planning your evaluation strategy

- What are the key 'performance drivers' for your intervention?
- What measures do you expect to/hope to influence in the short/longer term?

- Have you managed expectations?
- Can you benchmark your results?

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