

Sustaining Employee Engagement and Job Satisfaction

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A number of interesting reports are emerging that indicate business leaders are feeling they are not realizing the benefits of employee engagement initiatives.¹ One interpretation could be that employee engagement initiatives don't work. Yet, CEOs are citing employee engagement as one of their top five global business strategies for their,² and the topic is clearly rising in the minds of business leaders.³ There is also a soon-to-be-billion-dollar industry that has arisen⁴ to support and advise around these initiatives. Perhaps another interpretation could be that the sentiment is more a reflection of the enormous and ever-increasing challenges due to the fast-moving business landscape than any actual disconnection of organizational outcomes derived from positive work attitudes.

A 2015 SHRM research report confirms the importance of the fundamental facets of job satisfaction to employees.⁵ It seems the importance of various contributors to job satisfaction, such as pay and benefits, co-workers, supervision, career and challenging, meaningful work, has not fundamentally changed since these dimensions were articulated in the ground-breaking work of Smith, Kendall and Hulin⁶ and other researchers of the time. Although employee engagement as a construct has a much shorter research history,⁷ the accumulating research evidence that it is linked to organizationally relevant outcomes is compelling.⁸

Challenges

What is fundamentally shifting are the dynamics of the workplace in which these constructs play out.⁹ The same uncertainties currently plaguing the global economy and a firm's economic viability are also creating seismic shifts in the nature of work on an individual level and presenting a variety of new challenges in engaging employees for organizational performance. The challenges facing inspiring employee engagement and achieving both job satisfaction and organizationally relevant outcomes are many, varied and interconnected. The speed and complexity with which business moves today requires everything to be done in less time. Yet, when this pace results in frequently shifting priorities,¹⁰ individuals and teams can lose motivation because people are reluctant to act, fearing that they are working on the wrong things from the organization's perspective.

During times of turbulence, decision-making often can move up the organizational hierarchy as the organization attempts to reconcile competing priorities and achieve some sense of alignment. This can unintentionally further disempower employees who would usually add their own creative energies by following known priorities. Instead, employees have to double check or wait to be told what is required. Due to time constraints, true alignment may become elusive, generating a multitude of cascading first priorities and resulting in additional workload problems.

To further exacerbate the situation, the solution to employees' frustration with workload¹¹ directly competes with the organization's need for year-over-year productivity improvements, often euphemistically characterized as "doing more with less."¹² Middle management is squeezed from both sides, with executive leadership demanding work be done faster and cheaper, while employees demand ever more flexibility to do their increasing workloads lest they go elsewhere.

To keep up with the velocity of organizational changes, job changes within the organization also increase. As people move into different roles, knowledge and progress can be lost on action items to sustain engagement. Continuity becomes even more difficult, and more work is generated as new players attempt to make sense of their environment and the problems at hand.

As more solutions are demanded with insufficient time to work through complex problems, superficial approaches can predominate. These approaches can provide the illusion of resolution without long-term remediation. The issue then re-emerges (often in a more complex form with more urgency) at a later time, adding again to workload pressures.

Actions to Take

There is no doubt that there are many challenges in today's world of work. However, there are several actions that organizations can take now to sustain and improve employee engagement and job satisfaction.

Simplify and Focus

A laser-like focus that pinpoints the most critical business priorities is crucial both for the reduction of overall workload as well as for providing a focal point for engagement initiatives to drive organizational performance.¹³

Increase Emphasis on Alignment

Several recent reports are indicating that careful coordination or alignment of employees through engagement activities to organizational goals is one of the fundamental keys for success.¹⁴

Focus on Education for Execution

While many vendors are focusing on differences in measurement approaches (pulse surveys, one-item daily surveys, shorter surveys, more action-based items) to enhance engagement, little attention has been paid to the execution side of the equation. Better equipping supervisors and managers with knowledge of how to confront real issues within the workplace and problem solve with peers and subordinates could go a long way in fundamentally enhancing the workplace.

Once problems are identified, managers are expected to miraculously know how to address sometimes complex and systemic issues without much training or guidance. Providing tangible best practices and training to confront real workplace issues are key supports needed for effective action downstream.

Explore Greater Transparency Through New Communication Approaches

Watson Wyatt¹⁵ found that effective communication is essential to financial performance and employee engagement. Yet, Groysberg and Slind¹⁶ report that current corporate communication vehicles are broken and advocate new approaches to establishing two-way organizational conversations and the use of digital and social technologies to enhance collaborative conversations.

Leverage Experienced Talent

Harter's research suggests that higher-tenure employees report being less engaged than both people new to the organization or people about to retire. Yet, most current organizational work on engagement is being targeted at Millennials' needs. Harter argues that even a modest improvement in the engagement of the deeply experienced employees (if they have the right talent for their jobs) will result in an important untapped opportunity for most organizations.¹⁷

The Future

Additional work and thought are needed now to help best meet the challenges in the years ahead.

Redesign Work

The impact of work redesign and work enrichment has been well known since the 1950s.¹⁸ Tools and technology have continued to change to make work design less complicated. Yet, there needs to be a serious effort in corporations to redesign and reduce individual workload. Work redesign should both empower and enable employees toward greater levels of engagement and satisfaction¹⁹ and aid in simplification. Perhaps breaking work down into micro-tasks that can be vended out separately or using data and predictive algorithms to remove work altogether will come to the rescue.²⁰

Explore New Methods of Strategic Planning

Corporate strategic planning models tend to rest on the underlying assumption that work for the full year can be planned and mapped out in its entirety. Yet, given the volume and velocity of change, new work requirements surface during the course of the year. Employees and management are then caught between what has been promised for the strategic plan (and on which most performance management and budget processes are predicated) and the realities of current demands of the business. New strategic models that do not rigidly hold to proscribed work but that are more opportunistic and dynamic are needed.

Enable Through Coordinated HR Practices

Although a great deal of work has been done on integrated HR,²¹ further work in this arena is also needed. Employee engagement will always be limited by the amount of enablement that the organization provides. Enablement means providing the right tools and environment for engagement to flourish so that those who are engaged have the opportunity to make their maximum contributions.

Facilitate Recovery

Initially, engagement was conceptualized as the opposite side of the continuum from burnout.²² Yet, across time the consideration of burnout and work overload on employee engagement has mostly disappeared from corporate discussions. Sonnentag found that individuals who received ample day-level recovery time were more likely to experience a high level of work engagement during the subsequent day.²³

Smartphone use, while providing flexibility, can also prevent enough away-time to assist in energy renewal.²⁴ Some organizations used to require employees to take a predetermined amount of vacation each year to get a real break from the workflow. Current technologies enable workflow to now come with employees on vacation. New approaches are desperately needed to facilitate rest and recovery in a 24/7 world.²⁵

Commit Long Term

Long-term commitment from the top is required to see engagement initiatives through various business cycles.²⁶ Yet, companies that are able to unlock the magic of engagement will continue to outperform others.²⁷

The actions needed now and in the future are simple but far from easy to achieve.

Endnotes

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