Brief

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Employee engagement – the "great hoax" or a great idea that is misunderstood?

Organisations have spent billions cutting costs, re-engineering their processes and integrating their IT. Increasingly, however, there has been a general realisation that success is completely dependent on people. Time, effort and money have all been channelled into identifying how we might "leverage" this resource, and focus on the business benefits of high performance and "discretionary effort".

Is employee engagement really just another approach to surveys?

The result seems to be an enormous focus on "employee engagement". A study by Deloitte research outfit Bersin estimated the US engagement market at $1.5bn alone. However, there is a rising criticism that in the rush to find the answer, many organisations and consultants have done little more than simply give the old ’job satisfaction"’ survey a facelift - and are avoiding the more fundamental, humanistshift required to really provide engaging working environments.

Compare many organisations’ ’climate survey"’ from the late 90’s with their current ‘engagement survey’ and in many cases there would be little difference, despite a large leap in our understanding of what it means to have engaged employees, and the conditions needed to foster that engagement.

In addition, many companies circulate surveys each year, decide on one or two surface level actions that rarely get completed or communicated, and miss the opportunity to really look at current practices and develop the ways which they do things and support their employees.

Are many engagement programmes just lip service?

This act of "paying lip service" is leading to a degree of scepticism about the whole concept of engagement. A recent article in Forbes - *The engagement racket, a hoax of immense proportions* – sums this perspective up and challenges that engagement is little more than a ‘check a box, once a year’ feedback exercise allowing a tone-deaf HR leader say to her leadership team, "Look how high our engagement scores are this year! Surely I’m doing my job!"’.

Another recent piece of research showed that that the claims by some survey providers such as Gallup, or ‘best place to work’ schemes, market their questionnaires using wafer-thin correlation calculations of the business benefits of engagement.

Others have pointed out that many of the long-term employee survey providers have indeed continued selling very-long-standing questions and concepts – dressing them up as ‘engagement’ – because their ‘unique selling point’ is their benchmark database. The need for continuing long-standing comparisons creates a built-in bias against updated thinking.

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A reminder of what engagement is really about – based on a clear psychological definition

Most of this is of course a challenge to the way engagement is being sold and practiced rather thanan attack on the fundamental concept or its beneficial potential.

If we take a step back and look at the compelling evidence and academic research into truly engaging organisations, there are important insights and reminders. It shows that engagement is a clearly definable psychological state where people are *dedicated* to the organisation and their work, are *absorbed* in their day to day activity, and have emotional, physical and mental *vigour*, or energy to apply to their work:

- A ***dedicated*** employee is strongly involved in their work, experiencing a sense of significance, enthusiasm, inspiration, pride and challenge.
- An employee with ***vigour*** has high levels of energy and mental resilience while working, and a willingness to invest effort in their work and persistence even in the face of difficulties.
- An employee who is highly ***absorbed*** is concentrating fully and happily engrossed in their work, so that time passes quickly - and who often do not detach from their work easily.

This is a richer, more precise and more useful definition of engagement than one of simple 'motivation – and clearly goes well beyond the old 'job satisfaction'. This definition implies a very active, focused, and resilient state at work. Research and case studies show us this leads to happier, healthier employees, with far less cases of burnout, stress or health issues - and with the outcome of significantly improved job performance.

As we have seen in recent years, there is now more sophisticated statistical analysis which confirms that engaged employees have a direct impact on the bottom line. A good example is the 'Engaging for Success' report commissioned by the UK Government which makes a strong case that is has 'nailed the evidence', drawing upon academic research, survey and financial data.

They also looked at a range of case studies from leading companies and organisations showing clear relationships between employee engagement and high organisational productivity and performance across all sectors of the economy.

Building employee engagement requires meeting three psychological needs

So, how do we increase employee engagement? Most of the attention in the media – often driven by consultants and providers - is focused on the types of things we can roll-out across the organisation. There is no shortage of blogs, conferences, books – mainly focused on initiatives such as the use of social media, new interactive apps and software, effective storytelling, and of course, metrics and research.

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But all of this is about very top-down, centrally managed ‘solutions’ which is in danger of ignoring that this is primarily as much about the individual, and their day to day human needs, desires and experience as it is about organisational structures, initiatives and process.

The father of employee engagement, William Kahn, first identified three key psychological needs that must be met to help employees to feel more engaged: *meaningfulness*, *safety* and *availability*. If we are determined to truly shift levels of engagement in an organisation, we need to look at these deep human drivers and find ways to provide an environment to meet them:

1. ***Psychological meaningfulness***

   Employees often seek meaning or purpose in their work, from doing something that meets their own values, through to making a difference to others or society. They like to see a direct link between what they do, and that what they are contributing to, and be able to behave in ways that are most like themselves.

   When people are treated with dignity, respect and valued for their contributions, they get a greater sense of meaningfulness. Environments that help individuals to build meaningfulness often include:

   a. Roles that provide challenge, autonomy and variety and clearly aligned to vision and mission

   b. A culture of constructive feedback, reward and recognition

   c. A close alignment between an individual’s own values and those of the organisation - which allows individuals to express their own personality, beliefs and values.

   d. Opportunities for development and personal growth.

2. ***Psychological safety***

   In order to commit fully to their jobs, employees need to trust they can show their true self and thoughts without fear of negative consequences. Employees engage more actively in organisations which foster trust and supportiveness between employees and their colleagues, their line manager and the wider leadership of the company. Key aspects to creating this type of environment include:

   a. A supportive and transparent culture, group dynamics and colleague behaviour

   b. A strong sense of concern about employee wellbeing, and commitment to fairness and doing right by employees

   c. A strong transformational or authentic leadership, encouraging challenge and feedback and valuing employee opinion

   d. Job security.

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3. ***Psychological availability:***

   Employees need to feel they have the physical, emotional and mental resources available to commit themselves to work. Employees who are over-worked, run-down, tired physically and mentally - and who are continually experiencing challenging emotional situations without resources or coping mechanisms to deal with them - will be far from engaged.

   Wellbeing at work is often treated as a tick box exercise or 'HR initiative' in organisations, but a healthy, fully available employee is vital for wider engagement. Key organisational attributes include:

   a. Providing the right volume of work for individuals (enough to stretch but not too much to exhaust), with clear and consistent expectations of their work
   b. Ensuring employees have the right tools, equipment and skills for the job
   c. Good control over work-life balance, with proper time to disengage from work (for example Daimler's recent decision to delete email whilst people are on holiday!)
   d. Training and support to build up individuals 'personal resources' such as resilience, optimism and self belief.

Engagement is complex and requires more than a few simple solutions

Engagement is a worthy and important goal for organisations,in terms of both human, societal and bottom line impact. Of course we do need some actions to be planned from the top, across the organisation – such as articulating a clear and credible purpose for the business. It also involves investment in tools that enable engagement such as social media and the right kind of surveys.

But, beyond all this, the research shows us it will take a more substantial perspective shift in most businesses to create the context for fully effective and beneficial engagement.

Sources

Sources used for this Brief include: Berson & associates*: Employee engagement: market review, buyers guide and provider profiles* (Deloitte); Crawford, Rich, Buckman, Bergeron: *Antecedents and Drivers of employee engagement* (University of Iowa, California State University, Arizona State University, Harvard); Crush: *Engagement surveys: Gallup and Best Companies face criticism* (HR Magazine); Macleod and Clark: *Engaging for Success* (UK Govt)*;* MacLeod: *MacLeod, Chair, Employee Engagement Task Force* (YouTube); Khan: *Psychological conditions of personal engagement and disengagement at work (Academy of Management Journal);* Little,

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