Engaging Employees to Bring Their Best to Work

Today's workplace is ever-changing. Modern organizations require the whole person to be engaged in the workplace intellectually, emotionally, and physically. Research has shown that increased work-related engagement results in improved employee and customer satisfaction, safety, and overall performance and profits.[1,2] Engaged employees are more willing to learn new skills and ways to be innovative, adaptable, resilient, team-oriented, and open to diverse perspectives. In addition, company performance and employee engagement are closely linked to employee health.[3,4,5]

The changing workplace and workforce, along with the emergence of positive psychology and the need to connect work to the whole person, created the focus on employee engagement in the workplace. This approach is essential for overall employee productivity and organizational performance.

Employee Engagement in the Workplace

Although industry leaders define employee engagement differently, the term has been referred to as the intention of commitment with purpose and to "place in gear."[6] William Kahn, an academician and recognized as the founding father of the concept of engagement, described "personal engagement" as "the harnessing of organization members' selves to their work roles; in engagement, people employ and express themselves physically, cognitively, and emotionally during role performances."[7] Kahn believed that employees become engaged when three psychological needs are met: (1) personal feelings of meaningfulness (one is valued and appreciated), (2) psychological safety (one can do and work without fear of negative consequences), and (3) availability (one has the physical and mental resources without distractions to engage at work). Varying terms, definitions, descriptions, measurement tools, and models have since been associated with employee engagement. From a review of over 200 published articles, four approaches emerge related to defining employee engagement.[8]

- **Personal Engagement**. Kahn's research laid the foundation for this term, which describes an intention by individuals to bring their best self to work, to grow personally and professionally through their work role, and to contribute to the organization through their full personal engagement of thoughts, feelings, and physical energies. This approach has become expressed more recently as the hands, head, and heart approach to employee engagement at work.[7]

- **Work or Job Engagement.** This approach focuses on greater satisfaction and involvement by achieving "a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind" that is characterized by:

  - **Vigor** (high levels of mental resilience and energy, even while overcoming challenges).

  - **Dedication** (intense effort and intention of work while benefiting from sensations of pride or significance).

  - **Absorption** (intense focus and concentration with challenges of detaching).[9]

- **Satisfaction Engagement.** This approach is what is most commonly referred to as employee engagement. One of the first firms to popularize the term was the Gallup Organization, referring to employee engagement as "an individual's involvement and satisfaction with as well as enthusiasm for work,"[1,9] defining engagement broadly as a state of positive attitude. This approach has a strong relationship with:

  - Individuals' **job satisfaction.**

  - **Commitment** to the organization.

  - **High performance.**

- **Multidimensional engagement.** This approach views the unique and significant differences and psychological connections of the individual's engagement with the workplace, including their job and position within the organization, compared with engagement with the work alone.[10] For example, research has demonstrated that engagement is a function of how employees are treated by their leaders. A stronger relationship predicts higher employee engagement.[2]

Benefits of Employee Engagement

Employers continue to explore ways to gain optimal levels of performance from their employees. For businesses, successful employee engagement can provide numerous benefits to the organization. Although research related to evidence-based practices in the workplace is ongoing, research from the last three decades reveals a positive relationship among employee attitudes, engagement with safety, job satisfaction and employee retention, customer satisfaction, and financials. Better employee engagement is also associated with reduced absenteeism and merchandise shrinkage.

Below is a list of favorable outcomes for individuals and an organization.[2,9–13]

Favorable Outcomes of Employee Engagement

Individual Benefits	Organizational Benefits
• Higher job satisfaction and commitment.	• Improved customer service ratings.
• Life satisfaction and lower levels of ill health.	• Improved customer loyalty.
• Fewer absences.	• Improved sales and profits.
• Fewer safety issues.	• Increased worker loyalty.
• Higher performance ratings.	• Reduced employee turnover.
• Increase mental resilience.	• Reduced absenteeism.
• Sense of belonging.	• Improved quality with fewer errors.
• Sense of achievement.	• Improved patient safety.
• Personal and professional growth.	• Increased teamwork.
• Alignment of personal and corporate values.	• Increased employee morale.
	• Improved health and well-being.

Achieving Employee Engagement in the Workplace

Employee engagement actually begins before the employee is hired. Ensuring the right fit of individual, work, and organization is essential. High performers who excel at their craft may not fit well into the organizational culture. Evaluating this in advance of hiring is beneficial for all parties.

Once an employee is hired, organizational engagement is essential. This involves coworkers, managers, and executives, as well as the company's culture and values. Below are five elements of a highly engaged employee workplace.

1. People and Relationships

The workplace allows for social connections that can either enhance employee engagement or diminish it. Working with individuals who respect, admire, and enjoy one another makes for a better work environment. Employees value a boss who appreciates them and shares this through simple or more involved recognition.

2. Empathetic Leaders

The best leaders and managers understand that their success and that of the organization rely on employees' achievements. They seek to know not only the person's job, but the whole person—including their strengths and goals. Great managers empower employees by recognizing and valuing employees' contributions, and actively seeking their ideas and opinions. Employee expect leaders and managers to lead by example and demonstrate appreciation for employees.

3. Benefits Including Wellness Offerings

In addition to pay, employees are motivated to work for an employer because of the additional benefits, which may include health insurance, profit-sharing, flexible work schedules, and recognition and rewards for performance. More employees also are asking for wellness offerings such as on-site fitness centers, cafeterias or food access, and health coaching services.

4. Training and Development

Organizations and individuals benefit from personal and professional growth and development. It is important to train leaders and managers on how to retain talented employees. From career development and leadership courses to coordinated skill building, training is essential for all employees. Other engagement strategies include internal promotion, travel opportunities, and work exchanges.

5. Capture Timely Feedback and Take Action

Organizations can use existing tools to encourage employee input on the design or improvements to their program. Employers not only should invite employees to participate in a workplace experience survey, they should ask them to help modify or improve tools to make them relevant to their work and company culture. When a company invites its employees to share their feedback through regular surveys or focus groups, the employees' expectation is that leadership will follow through and take action. Employers should use the data to monitor key performance metrics and identify needs or areas for improvement. In developing action plans, the steps should be realistic and include concrete examples of how those steps will enhance employee experience and engagement, while achieving company goals.

Opportunities and Resources

There are a rising number of tools for measuring employee engagement, from research instruments to commercial surveys. Gaining insight on employee engagement to include employee satisfaction, effect on client satisfaction, and overall engagement of the whole person at work is an opportunity for all employers.

Ultimately, employee engagement is a connection of intellectual, physical, and emotional energy—a state of mind, body, and spirit—at the workplace with favorable impact to both the individual and the organization. Below are a few tools and resources for employers interested in learning more about employee engagement.

Tools and Resources for Engaging Employees in the Workplace

- *National Healthy Workplace (NHWP) Health and Safety Climate Survey*

- *Health Promotion in the Workplace: Improving Awareness, Enhancing Motivation, Building Skills, and Creating Opportunity* (PDF of book is available at no cost), by the Art and Science of Health Promotion Institute

- Harvard Business Review

    - What Great Managers Do to Engage Employees

    - The Impact of Employee Engagement on Performance

- Gallup Q^{12} Employee Engagement Survey

> The **CDC Workplace Health Resource Center** (WHRC) is a one-stop shop for organizations to find credible tools, guides, case studies, and other resources to design, develop, implement, evaluate, and sustain workplace health promotion programs. Visit the **CDC Workplace Health Resource Center** to learn more about and strategies for employee engagement.

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