

Employee engagement - Sine qua non for organizations growth

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Employee engagement has been getting the attention of academia and practitioners, alike, for the past two decades. More so, in the recent past, employee engagement has been listed as one of the top three priorities of HR practitioners across the world. There is a general agreement among HR managers that an engaged employee expends significant amount of discretionary efforts towards organization's growth and therefore is critical for organizations performance and success, compared to someone who is just "getting-by".

Many researchers have published seminal literature on the topic – the most notable one from [Saks \(2006\)](#) who made the distinction between job engagement and organizational engagement. While, intuitively both Job and Organization engagement may appear the same to a casual observer, they are not – there is significant distinction between their constructs. [Saks' \(2006\)](#) model identified the antecedents (Jobs characteristics, perceived organizational support, perceived supervisor support, rewards & recognition, procedural justice and distributive justice) and the consequence (Job satisfaction, organizational commitment, intention to quit, organizational citizenship behavior) of employee engagement. The model is anchored on the social exchange theory concepts which states that a reciprocal

interdependence develops between employees and organizational which evolves into trust, over time, provided both parties abide by rules of engagement. The employees commit their emotional, physical and cognitive selves in exchange for resources (social, economic) provided by the organization.

Saks empirically tested the model with 102 respondents on a five-point Likert scale using snowball sampling. Apart from establishing the hypothesis that job and organization engagement are different constructs, the results also confirmed that perceived organization support predicted both job and organizational engagement of the employees, while procedural justice predicts organizational engagement. In addition, job characteristics (constructs include skill variety, task identity, task significance, autonomy and feedback) predict job engagement. More importantly, these two constructs of job and organization engagement mediated between the antecedents and consequence variables of the model construct. There have been other studies, that are equally significant, that spoke on engagement. For example, [Kahn \(1990\)](#) explained engagement across three dimensions of meaningfulness, safety and availability, while [Schaufeli and Bakker \(2004\)](#) used the levers of vigor, dedication and absorption to explain employee engagement. Several academic studies tested the

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correlation between high employee engagement and business performance and found a strong positive association between the two – both from the financial performance perspective and employee wellbeing perspective (healthy, energetic and low absenteeism).

It is important for organizations, especially operating in today's VUCA (Volatile, Uncertain, Complex and Ambiguous) world to plan their HR policies that would enhance the engagement of their employees to drive overall growth for their firms. The strategic HR interventions adopted but many firms included both monetary rewards (industry leading salaries, generous increments, bonuses and stock options) and non-monetary incentives (job re-design, accelerated career growth, healthy work environment, sabbatical, tailored training programs and more). Several billion dollars were spent on these programs, globally. However, research on employee engagement by leading HR consultancy firms like Gallup have shown that employee engagement hovers around 15 per cent for most firms – across sectors and across countries. Their research has also shown that almost equal proportions of employees are actively disengaged from their work while a significant majority doing just enough to survive their jobs. Research has shown that the loss of productivity due to disengaged employee runs into billions of dollars.

So what went wrong and what is the remedy?

- Employee engagement is not an “all or none” concept. It occurs on a continuum. Companies need to realize that it is possible for the employees to be engaged with their job while being indifferent towards the organization, as postulated by Saks (2006).

- There are nine different types of employee engagement archetypes as proposed by Graber (2015). Graber argued that by asking people how they perceive their job (positive, indifferent, negative) and observing how they behave at work (constructive, neutral, negative) it is possible to construct nine different employee engagement archetypes (All-star, workhorse, martyr, underachiever, drifter, cynic, brat, delinquent and saboteur).
- Understanding where the employees are in the 3×3 matrix of perception and behavior grid of Graber, companies can tailor appropriate intervention to motivate employee. For instance, for someone who perceives herself to be a martyr, the underlying angst would be lack of meaning in the job or something to do with the incentives. For someone who is in the underachiever quadrant may need more important, strategic work instead of the operational tasks one may be engaged with.
- HR managers should adopt “horses for courses” policy towards tailoring the rewards program. While the organizations may provide certain standard facilities (hygiene factor) that may be common to and used by all (like gym, crèche facilities and cafeteria), HR managers should have and offer a menu of non-financial rewards that the employees can choose from. It could be time-off to work for a social cause dear to the employee, help underprivileged children etc.
- In addition, for the first time in history, four generations of employees are in the workforce at the same time (Baby boomers, Gen X, Gen Y and Millennials). The values, beliefs, aspirations of

each of these generations are vastly different. Again, a menu based approach in providing benefits, compensation, training programs, task significance, autonomy will make a difference, instead of adopting a “cookie-cutter”

Highly engaged workforce will probably be the biggest differentiator for companies in today's world. Organizations that “crack this code” will witness industry leading growth. Others will be just “also-ran”. Employee engagement is too important a strategy to be attempted piece-meal. A holistic, sustained, comprehensive approach is the need of the hour.

References

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Further reading

Gallup (2016), “The worldwide employee engagement crisis”, available at: www.gallup.com/ (accessed 15 February 2019).

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