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Employee Engagement – Beyond the Survey

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Ten Contemporary Approaches to Improved Employee Engagement

Employee Engagement is a particularly hot topic with CEOs and CHROs today. With advancements in technology and the rise of HR analytics, the HR community is excited about being able to find more meaningful and reliable ways to measure engagement. Moreover, the time is rapidly approaching where levels of engagement can be predicted for individuals or groups of employees, so that pre-emptive action can be taken for those deemed to be retention risks, for example.

It's interesting to note that when we raise the topic of engagement with HR leaders, more often than not the response is related to the timing or the nature of the company's engagement survey. We notice that far less of the conversation is on a practical level, about the things that companies are doing at a grassroots level to innovate and drive the results that their surveys call for. Engagement is a topic that we all talk about, but it's easy to use employee engagement as a buzzword around the conference table and have it go no further. In this article, we have tried to explore ten of the underlying principles that lie behind some of the practical engagement tools that are proving successful in the workplace today.

1. Consider the Full Employee Lifecycle

The first thing to recognize is that engagement starts before an employee is hired and can end well after he or she leaves the organization. There are seven key stages identified by Employee Engagement Consultant, Gregory F. Simpson, which every employer should address in order to ensure the establishment and continuation of a successful employee engagement strategy.
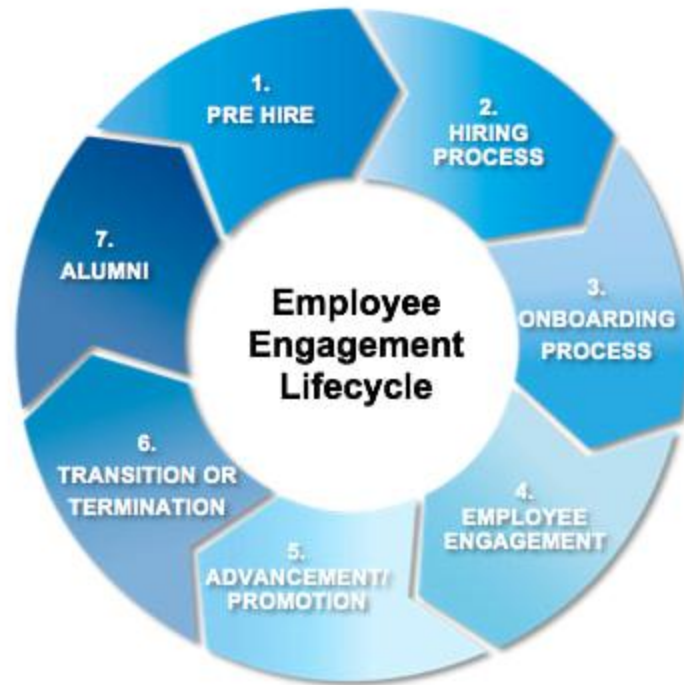
1. Pre-hire: It all starts here. Your Employer Brand is the key to attracting future employees.

2. Hiring Process: The importance of the hiring process to employee engagement cannot be overemphasized. This is the first opportunity a potential employee gets to understand the culture and values of an organization. The quality of job description, interview process and who sits on the interview panel will determine for an employee the value of the opportunity.

3. Onboarding process: The early days of employment can shape a new employee's view of his or her position in the organization. Common questions employees may ask themselves: 'How is my role viewed in the company? Is it consistent with what I was told during the recruitment process? Do I have the access to key decision makers that I need to perform my responsibilities?'

4. Employee Engagement: Once employment is in full flow, engagement starts to become more about meeting expectations, interactions with colleagues and key relationships with managers. 'Do I get on with my manager? Can we work harmoniously? Am I performing the job that I was hired for; or being asked to do additional duties beyond the scope of my role?' This is also when the effects of the physical environment and opportunities for health and wellness come into play, as employees consider whether the environment is conducive to their success and optimum performance.

5. Advancement / Promotion: In addition to being recognized and rewarded for their performance, employees want to advance their careers. A Gallup poll found that 87% of Millennials say that development potential is the most important factor in a job. A common failure of organizations is to prepare people for advancement, even if a suitable opportunity does not currently exist. It is critical to continue to train and upskill employees. If you don't, someone else out there will.

6. *Transition or Termination:* What is becoming more apparent is the effect of a transition or termination. This can be an incredibly emotional time with long-term implications for the employee. Key aspects for employers to consider include:

- How does that person leave the business?
- Was it voluntary/ involuntary and how will it be communicated?
- What steps are in place to ensure a smooth transition?
- How comprehensive are exit interviews, and do they offer room for feedback from the employee?

7. *Alumni:* This is often overlooked and yet it can be very powerful. Organizations should consider how they are keeping track of former employees; whether or not they are able to contribute to the company in some way; and their overall value as torch bearers. It is important to consider how to effectively leverage these relationships. This can help significantly with employer branding and to attract the next generation of employees. And so the cycle begins again.

2. It Starts With the CEO and Ends With the Survey – Not the Other Way Around

CEO and top leadership commitment is vital to driving high levels of employee engagement - this cannot only be the job of HR. While the survey is a great tool for helping to set and measure goals around engagement, the active involvement and participation of the company's full leadership is what sets the best apart from the rest.

As background, we particularly like Aon Hewitt's white paper on '*The Engaging Leader Experiences, Beliefs and Behaviors*' (April 2014). There has also been a lot published, notably by Ken Blanchard, on Servant Leadership. Authentic leadership is another approach that has been written about widely. Whatever method a leader uses to engage with and energize an organization, it is clear that companies with leaders who are skilled and proactive at engaging with employees are at an advantage; and that deficits in this area quickly become obvious.

3. One Size Doesn't Fit All

There is some interesting discussion taking place in HR circles currently about the demographics of engagement. For example, blue collar employees tend to want different things from an organization versus white collar employees – in terms of benefits; the way they want to engage with their boss and colleagues; and the way they view their relationship with the company overall. There have been studies conducted which reveal that organizations with high numbers of female employees tend to have a preference for career and income stability; and that sales employees have a very different set of motivators around how they want to be compensated and recognized. And of course, Millennials

in the workplace have created a much more complex environment and a very different set of demands when it comes to how companies need to think (and re-think) about engagement. Millennials have a 'disruptive' and 'change-oriented' mentality and they apply this mindset to the workplace. "*They want to be free of old workplace policies and performance management standards, and they expect leaders and managers to adapt accordingly. They see work and life as closely intertwined. Because of this, millennials want to have a different relationship with their manager. They want their manager to care about them as an employee and a person. Gallup has discovered that 62% of millennials who feel they can talk with their manager about non-work-related issues plan to be with their current organization one year from now.*" Amy Adkins, *What Millennials Want From Work and Life, Gallup Business Journal May 2016.*

Companies are increasingly looking to HR analytics to make predictions about different demographic groups. Using big data can help companies identify the core values and behavioral traits of both the employer and candidates in the hiring process, and to determine if there is a likely match. "*Survey company Saberr uses algorithms to compile, process and compare fundamental values, behavioral compatibility and diversity to predict the potential strength of interpersonal relationships between certain applicants and potential employers. They do this with a survey for both the applicant and the employer that moves past skills and credentials, thereby bypassing initial bias in the hiring process.*" Anne Loehr - *4 Ways HR Analytics Can Improve Workplace Diversity; REWORK, June 2015.*

The use of these types of surveys at all stages of the employee lifecycle can help to act as an ongoing 'career calibration' tool to ensure that engagement levels are still high. In the face of this, to use just one annual engagement survey appears to be very limiting, especially given the opportunity for much deeper levels of demographic segmentation that is now available to organizations.

4. Purpose and Meaning are Compelling

Purpose and meaning for both companies and employees are vital to keeping the relationship strong. It is important for everyone to have a strong sense of what a company is trying to achieve, and the role it intends to play within the broader corporate scheme of things – and within society as a whole. The same goes for each employee in the organization. Each individual needs to feel they have something to strive for, a clear identity within the organization. They want to know that their role is important to the performance and evolution of the company. Organizations that consistently lead in employee engagement make a point of creating meaning for employees. This can revolve around a combination of things and would typically cover recognition of employee achievements; opportunities to interact with and delight customers; and providing opportunities to 'give something back' to society through company sponsored individual or group pursuits.

Recognition does not need to come in the form of financial reward. It could come in the form of opportunities to take part in critical new projects; a gateway to a new experience. Key for any business leader is to identify what these trigger points are for each employee; and/or to make it clear

from the outset what the vision and values of the company are and go out and source talent that fits this message. This highlights the importance of a clear Employee Value Proposition which is compatible with the company's employer branding strategy; as well as a, *"set of values which articulates the balance of the rewards and benefits that employees collect in return for what they contribute to a workplace."* – Brandon Rigoni and Bailey Nelson – *What Attracts the Best Employees to a Company, Gallup Business Journal, February 2016.* Once established, these values can be revisited and retested to ensure all parties remain on track.

5. Reality Check: Culture and Inclusion Weigh Heavily on Engagement

There is no doubt that company culture – and how inclusive that culture is – drives engagement. Arguably, culture is the number one factor which drives a company's ability to engage with and retain its employees. Culture, inclusion and engagement are deeply intertwined concepts. Knowing your company culture and having a clear position on inclusion and its drivers within the overall company environment, and how that is projected into the broader community, is absolutely necessary. It's interesting to see how many companies have a Diversity and Inclusion function, which is often quite silo-ed away from some of the most high-level thinking and discussions that take place within top levels of the company.

Certainly key drivers of engagement include a highly inclusive approach when it comes to decision-making, and particularly the dissemination of internal information. For example, good practice would include:

- Sharing 'inside information' in a cascaded way, and before information is announced externally
- High levels of transparency around why certain decisions were taken
- Giving groups of employees a voice on important initiatives that impact the broader organization
- Finding ways to make select company activities relevant to the families of employees

Gallup has found that engaged employees are more likely to say their company values diverse ideas. Furthermore, *"Engagement is also linked to how an employee feels his or her employer would respond to discrimination concerns. When asked to rate a statement about raising a concern about discrimination and having confidence in the employer to do what is right, 50% of engaged employees gave their employer a "5" rating, indicating they were highly confident. On the other hand, just 3% of actively disengaged employees rated their company a "5" on the same item."* Gallup also identifies a useful practical approach to improving inclusiveness: adopting a strengths-based approach to employee development. *"Innate talents vary considerably within any demographic grouping. Strengths-based development entails identifying each person's natural talents and combining these with the skills and learning to put him or her in a position to do what he or she does best - develop his or her strengths."* Rebecca Riffkin and Jim Harter - *Using Employee Engagement to Build a Diverse Workforce.*

6. Foster Mutual Accountability For Robust Goal Setting Processes

People like to be challenged, and sometimes too much freedom can become less rather than more motivating. Well-meaning company leaders often strive for 'maximum flexibility' when in reality greater challenge and accountability could arguably better energize individuals or an entire organization. Key to success is a robust goal setting process for each employee, where goals can be far reaching. Areas to consider include the allocation of projects with give the employee responsibility outside of his or her day-to-day job including assignments that extend into the area of customer or community service.

It is interesting to consider to what extent the company should feel responsible for an employee's health and well-being. For example, is the organization responsible for teaching its employees proper nutrition in order to ensure that are energized and physically able to perform well during the full work day?

Gregory F. Simpson puts it well. *"There should be an alliance between the company and employee where both succeed and both fail together. It is an invisible contract, a symbiotic relationship."*

7. Take Advantage of Technology

Without a doubt, smarter, more progressive organizations excel in their use of technology, making it easier to interact with employees (and customers) globally. Having looked at research into this area, we can see that there are a number of ways these organizations are looking at further improving engagement. We were particularly drawn to the work of Legal Templates who published an online article in February 2016 entitled '10 Ways Technology Can Enhance Employee Engagement'. They approached a number of innovative business leaders to see what technology tools they used to improve engagement. Our favorites are below:

- One area is around increasing the visibility of the individual regarding what is happening company-wide. Andrea Lotz of AllProWebTools uses a tool called the Workflow Timeline to improve employee engagement.*"The Workflow Timeline is a live feed of business updates from everyone in our small company, showing what everyone is working on, what new business is incoming, and all internal client notes."* Lotz goes on to explain that her company's software can also help facilitate independent collaboration on tasks, as each employee can see what other team members and departments are working on, and independently ask for help or offer it.
- Another is Shelby Kennard's company, Limeade.com, which integrates employee engagement and health. She describes Limeade as 'a points and incentive based platform that acts as a single hub for the employee experience.' The first step is to ask employees what they care about. Limeade.com then conducts biometric screenings and a science-based well-being assessment that measures six different life dimensions selected by the employees. They then set up a personalized program to follow-up with rewards and points given for reaching goal targets and taking part in certain challenges which are associated with the corporate culture. This

information is accessible on mobile platforms and is updated in real time, making it is easy for each employee to track their own progress.

- Founder of CBG Benefits, Chris Costello uses his employee portal to ensure the long term employees and new hires can get to know each other and feel part of the company culture. He designed a portal that enabled employees to publish pictures and mini-bios (with professional and personal/fun information). This is a great tactic to help people get to know each other and start building relationships around mutual interests, whilst at the same time understanding where the core values of the organization originated.

- Another business leader, Neal McNamara, demonstrates his belief in the benefit of frequent surveys. 'Our company makes a web application called TINYpulse, which is designed to improve employee engagement through pulse surveys. We also use it in our workplace. Last week, through the software, we learned that a number of people were having the same problem with the flow of our morning meeting. During our biweekly review of the survey data, we voted to change the meeting flow.'

We have also heard of organizations opening up an online forum for employees to ask questions/raise issues. These are then voted on by the employee base as topics to raise at future meetings. Giving employees a voice is one of the most powerful tools in employee engagement and the use of technology to amplify this voice is where more progressive companies are leading the charge.

Technology can be shaped to fit your organization and its goals. If you are not using it to bring your employees in line with the values and culture, you're likely missing out on noticeable increases in enterprise-wide engagement and productivity. It is also worth considering that the efficient and creative use of technology is critical for millennials. This group wants real time, any time interaction, instant feedback and all on a mobile platform. Like it or not, this is the way they are most comfortable interacting, and companies need to shape their work practices to suit. This is not a trend - it is the future and employers need to get on board and ahead of this in order to attract and engage this organization-defining population.

8. Shape Perceptions through Enlightened Social [Media](#) Practices

Social media spans the entire engagement lifecycle, from when people are at school to the way alumni stay in touch. It shapes opinions on a company. The very decision whether or not to even consider a particular organization as a place of employment can be determined, at least in part, by an experience shared on social platforms. Think for a moment about how quickly a positive or negative interview experience can circulate and percolate within a peer group and how easily perceptions are formed based on the views shared over these platforms. An organization's history and achievements can be cast aside in a moment by a scathing tweet, instant message or blog post.

The use of social networking services like Yammer or Facebook at Work can be used for private communication within organizations and can foster greater levels of interaction between employees

in different global locations. This may be even more effective when employees work virtually from home offices, given the inherent difficulties of engaging with remote employees. Mastering these platforms can quickly instill a better sense of community. Social media is all about freedom of expression, and offering this freedom in the workplace is a huge step toward effective employee engagement.

9. Consider the Physical Environment

We are creatures of our environment and as biological entities are susceptible to the stimuli around us. It is important to understand how we react, how our mood and energy levels can be affected by such. Picture the small, hot, dimly lit cramped meeting room and cue the fight to stay focused and even awake. Perhaps this is a dramatic example, but it is also one which is not lost on entrepreneurs who now understand the impact that the work environment can have on individuals and their productivity. A pioneer in this field, Chief Executive and Founder of health centric real estate development service provider Delos Living LLC, Paul Scialla has developed a WELL standard, which all of his properties must meet. *"We spend 90% of our time inside. These environments should support human health and wellness,"* Mr. Scialla said. Delo's properties come with air and water that has been specially filtered and lighting tuned to the body's circadian rhythms. (As reported by Lizette Chapman, *The Wall Street Journal, October 2015*).

Not every organization can make such drastic changes. Costs are always a consideration. However, small yet extremely positive adjustments can be made to ambient lighting, optimal temperatures, and to ensure clean and well-circulated air. Employers are already redesigning physical workspaces in order to improve levels of peer interaction, creating breakout spaces for discussion groups. The most innovative are creating sleep pods to encourage 'energy naps'. In some circumstances, sound-proof rooms are available to foster an environment of loud expression and 'quiet spaces' are designated for those who excel in more peaceful surroundings. One such company is IBM, which has been developing 'design studios', where project teams of designers, business architects and programmers can come together to develop faster, more innovative client solutions.

10. Engagement Nirvana: Fully Integrated Employee Lives

Each employee has his or her own ecosystem which includes company, external business contacts, family and friends. Each employee forms part of a work team; each employee has different relationships and influencers within the company and externally. Each employee's workplace performance is shaped and impacted by this larger ecosystem. In addition, the physical and mental state of an employee also impacts performance. In the past we've all heard terms like 'work life balance' and 'health and wellness'. These concepts are now being wrapped into broader engagement strategies.

Many organizations have 'health and wellness' programs; and most major multinationals today do recognize that 'work/life balance' is essential to both physical and mental health. Many companies have exercise programs which individuals and families can participate in, for example. Taking this thinking further, one of the more interesting areas under consideration is meditation, a practice that all employees (and their families), from all walks of life can participate in. The positive mental and physical benefits of meditation are well documented. This is a topic that ChapmanCG is seriously looking into currently, and we will be reporting on our findings in the coming weeks and months.

Conclusion

It is important that we are taking about Employee Engagement, but the true measure of success is when we stop talking about it because it forms an inherent part of a company culture – and approach to Human Resources - naturally. So how do we establish a long lasting culture of engagement? This can only be fully achieved through continual dialogue between employer and employee, between manager and team; where there is an understanding that active listening is central to engagement. This suggests that the annual engagement survey is becoming a thing of the past. The annual engagement survey can remain a useful barometer; but to rely solely on one annual survey is to ignore the very nature of human interaction. In future, engagement efforts (and surveys) need to be increasingly individualized and frequent - much like monitoring an athlete's vital signs every day.

One thing is for sure, and that is that employee engagement is a very hot topic in HR leadership circles currently and for very good reason. Leading employers clearly understand that a high level of employee engagement is critical to being competitive. This is an area where more science is being applied daily; and where the bar is being raised by the most progressive heads of Human Resources, enthusiastically sponsored by their forward-thinking CEOs.

Tags

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