

PERSPECTIVES ON PRACTICE

Employee Engagement: Motivating and Retaining Tomorrow's Workforce

Michael Bradley Shuck
Florida International University

Karen Kelly Wollard
Kelly, Wollard & Associates, Inc.

Abstract

Tomorrow's workforce is seeking more than a paycheck; they want their work to meet their needs for affiliation, meaning, and self-development. Companies willing to meet these demands will capture the enormous profit potential of a workforce of fully engaged workers. This piece explores what engagement is, why it matters, and how human resource development (HRD) professionals can be strategic corporate partners in creating the changes necessary to engage the talent in their employees.

Work is fundamental to the human experience. In the United States, more than 140 million adults go to work every day (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2007). Work impacts self-esteem and influences the emotional (Harter, Schmidt, & Keyes, 2002; Judge & Watanabe, 1993), social, physical, and spiritual elements of life (Harter, Schmidt, & Keyes, 2002). Satisfaction with one's work has been linked to overall life satisfaction, showing that the influence of work goes beyond the physical characteristics of the workplace (Judge & Watanabe, 1993). For many, work is a place to find personal "meaning, stability, and a sense of community and identity" (Cartwright & Holmes, 2006, p. 202).

Employees desire positive feelings about their work experiences (Buckingham & Coffman, 1999; Harter, Schmidt, & Hayes, 2002; Harter, Schmidt, & Keyes, 2002; Wagner & Harter, 2006). Feeling positive about experiences at work goes beyond individual measures of job satisfaction, "an individual's attitude towards their work" (Brayfield & Rothe, 1951, p. 307) and commitment, an employee's "willingness to persist in a course of action and reluctance to change plans" (Vance, 2006, p. 4). Instead, feeling positive in the workplace takes a more worker-based perspective of employee engagement, an antecedent of measures such as job satisfaction and commitment. Employee engagement is defined as an employee's "involvement and satisfaction with as well as enthusiasm for work" (Harter, Schmidt, & Hayes, 2002, p. 269). Employee engagement occurs when employees know what to expect, have resources to complete their work, participate in opportunities for growth and feedback, and feel that they contribute significantly to the organization (Harter, Schmidt, & Hayes, 2002). Employee engagement is derived from work that stretches a person without psychologically or emotionally defeating him or her, clear goals, unbiased and unambiguous feedback, and a feeling of control over what

happens at work (Emmott, 2006). Being engaged in their work, employees find meaning and excitement in the jobs they perform.

Work, however, has become a place of frustration and disenchantment for many (Cartwright & Holmes, 2006). Employees face an “increasing expectation to produce more for less” (Covey, 2004, p. 2) with fewer resources (Buckingham & Coffman, 1999) and unclear expectations in an environment of low managerial support (Covey, 2004). These demands increase employee stress, resulting in disengaged employees in the workplace (Cartwright & Homes, 2006; Harter, Schmidt, & Keyes, 2002). A disengaged employee is someone who has distanced oneself from the rational and/or emotional components of work (Corporate Leadership Council, 2004); physically one shows up, but there is no energy or passion in what one is doing (Meere, 2005). Disengaged employees pull away from their teams, their managers, and eventually their jobs, all the while developing distrust toward management and focusing more on their unhappiness than on the mission or strategic direction of organizational outcomes (Payne, Cangemi, Fuqua, & Muhleakamp 1998).

The American Society for Training and Development (ASTD) estimates that unfortunately only 34% of employees go to work engaged (Paradise, 2007). This leaves 66% of the workforce either only slightly engaged or actively disengaged. Engaged and disengaged employees have been shown to perform differently from one another in the workplace (Buckingham & Coffman, 1999; Corporate Leadership Council, 2004; Harter, Schmidt, & Hayes, 2002). In a recent report from a survey meta-analysis of 681,799 employees in 23,910 independent business units in 25 companies, the Gallup Organization estimates that engaged employees are “18% more productive, 12% more profitable, 12% better at engaging customers...62% less likely to be involved with an accident on the job, 27% less prone to absenteeism, [and] 51% less likely to be a source of inventory shrink” (Fleming & Asplund, 2007, p. 169). Moreover, a survey of 50,000 employees revealed engaged employees are 87% less likely to leave a company (Corporate Leadership Council, 2004) and five times less likely to leave than disengaged employees (Vance, 2006). Buchanan (2004) also found that once an engaged employee is at work, his or her willingness to go above and beyond the call of duty increased by 57%, resulting in a 20% increase in individual performance improvement. In total, disengaged employees continue to cost the U.S. economy between \$250 and \$300 billion a year in lost productivity (Rath & Clifton, 2004). “When you add workplace injury, illness, turnover, absences, and fraud, the cost [of disengaged employees could] surpass \$1 trillion per year, or nearly 10% of the U.S. Gross Domestic Product (GDP)” (Rath & Clifton, 2004, p. 1). This engagement gap is extremely costly for employers. For many organizations, the difference between disengaged and engaged employees is the difference between success and failure (Harter, Schmidt, & Keyes, 2002).

Recent Trends

Much focus recently has been given to managers. Great managers ignite their employees. They bring out the best and inspire their staff to be more than just workers; and there is a noticeable human element in their style. In *Primal Leadership*, Daniel Goleman (2002) posited, “When we try to explain why they [managers] are so effective, we speak of strategy, vision, or powerful ideas. But the reality is much more primal: great leadership works through emotions” (p. 3). Maccoby (2007) argues that the social character of the workforce is changing and that this

change is causing paradigm shifts from the executive suite to the mailroom. Once content with following leaders because they had positional power, employees are now resisting this class differential and thinking about why they follow one leader over another or whether to follow any leader at all. Paralleling Goleman (2002), Maccoby (2007) argues that the leaders we need today are transforming those who follow them through inspiration of the mind, care of the heart, and acknowledgement of human emotions. “Understanding people [is becoming] essential for leaders and followers” (Maccoby, 2007, p. 14).

As the local culture of the workplace is shifting, “globalization, pressure for speed, innovation, and growing competition for talented workers have given organizations added incentives to review their employee relations strategies” (Joo & McLean, 2006, p. 228). HRD professionals have traditionally developed retention and recruitment strategies by focusing on “job design, recruitment, selection, training, compensation, and performance management” (Vance, 2006, p. 28); however, the world of work is changing. As employees are questioning traditional management hierarchies (Maccoby, 2007), human talent is becoming a scarce commodity and the term employee is becoming more defined because employees are becoming more mobile, knowledgeable, and skilled (Beck, 2003; Buckingham & Coffman, 1999; Huselid, 1995). Companies are beginning to experience an acute talent shortage, sparking an all out war for talent. Instead of looking only at satisfaction and commitment levels through job design, training, and compensation, links among the human dynamics of emotion, management practices, enthusiasm, and satisfaction for work (i.e., employee engagement) and HRD practices are beginning to surface (Fleming & Asplund, 2007).

Although research on employee engagement has been an emerging topic for organizations such as the Society for Human Resource Managers (Vance, 2006) and ASTD, very little of what is written conceptualizes employee engagement as an understandable or practical construct. Meanwhile, the number of disengaged employees continues to rise (Fleming & Asplund, 2007; Wagner & Harter, 2006). This employee engagement gap is financially harmful (Rath & Clifton, 2004) and yet seems to be partially preventable through a better understanding of employee engagement and practical strategies for developing an engaging culture in the workplace.

Opportunities for HRD Professionals and Researchers

HRD professionals are being asked to develop strategies that recruit and retain the most talented employees in ways that encompass emotional commitment, satisfaction, and enthusiasm for work, creating work environments that satisfy human needs (Maslow, 1970) and foster positive emotions (Fleming & Asplund, 2007; Fredrickson, 1998). But how can HRD professionals create these environments? We argue that they can focus on finding ways to encourage engagement at three levels.

The first level of engagement revolves around job clarity and helping an employee understand what is expected of him or her at work (Buckingham & Coffman, 1999). When an employee starts a new position, the first few days on the job seem fascinating, but the honeymoon wears off within a few weeks and real productivity is rightfully expected. If an employee has been shown how what one does fits with the company, has a clearly communicated

set of fundamental responsibilities, and understands not only what he or she needs to do but also what tools one has to complete responsibilities, employee engagement and profit follow. “A good team...is a lot like a great jazz band in which each player listens to the other instruments as he plays his own” (Wagner & Harter, 2006, p. 12). The better they understand their place in the band, their own instrument, what music to play, and how working with others makes a better product, the better the outcome. The same principle applies to business units. HRD professionals can encourage teamwork, self-discovery, communities of practice, and positive communication.

The second level of engagement is about employees adding value and meaning to their workplace. Employees have a need to contribute and to believe their work is meaningful. In direct parallel to Maslow’s (1970) need for belonging, this need for contribution gives insight to how an employee longs to add value to the work one is performing. Without meeting the belonging need, feelings of loneliness, ostracism, rejection, and friendlessness develop at work (Maslow, 1970). Employees become confused about why they are working and question the validity of their work. It is not enough for an employee to understand his or her responsibilities—one must feel that one’s responsibilities have meaning beyond a job description tucked away in the supervisor’s office. HRD practitioners can be the catalysts for creating work environments that value individual contributions while encouraging communication and fostering understanding. Reminding employees of their contribution to the success of the organization can be done, for example, through one-on-one communication or through organizational or departmental events focused on that purpose.

The highest level of employee engagement is exemplified by people who believe their work is changing the world. For employees, this is the ultimate buy-in. Only passionately engaged employees embody this level. At this stage, previous levels of engagement come together to create a harmony that (a) clarifies an employee’s responsibilities within the organization and provides the emotional, physical, and social resources to complete work and (b) gives meaning to the work of employees adding value to their life and providing direction, mission, and objectives that propel engaged employees forward toward satisfaction, happiness, and increased company profitability. Encouraging this level of employee engagement requires clarity of mission, corporate values and ethics, transparency in all aspects of the business, and an organizational belief that the work being accomplished meets a higher purpose. HRD practitioners can facilitate understanding and encourage the heart of the organization. We believe that most organizations contribute to the betterment of society in some way. The opportunity here is to capture the importance of the mission and personalize it to the contribution of each employee.

Concluding Thought for HRD Practitioners

Fostering employee engagement requires new skills, strategies, and approaches to the traditional aspects of HRD: organizational performance, change, and learning. Researchers can work with practitioners to discover ways of encouraging engagement by building more productive and satisfying workplaces and helping individuals find meaning and purpose in their lives and work. Employees are increasingly demanding this. HRD practitioners must begin focusing on how employees experience work rather than on how their managers deliver work. Each level of engagement discussed in this essay takes an employee-related point of view through some lens and encourages action based on findings. In sharp contrast to the traditional

view of top down management, an employee's perspective of work could help drive training programs, compensation packages, and productivity if taken seriously by managers and employees.

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Brad Shuck serves as the Associate Director for Career Development and Management at Florida International University. Shuck has been an invited speaker on the national and regional level on the topics of leadership development, transformative learning, adult learning strategies, and most recently, employee engagement strategies. Shuck attended Western Kentucky University in Bowling Green, Kentucky, where he received bachelor's degrees in psychology and sociology and his master of education degree in counseling and student affairs. He is currently pursuing a doctorate in adult education and human resource development with a cognate in leadership development at Florida International University. He can be reached at brad.shuck@gmail.com.

Karen Kelly Wollard, Ed. D., has spent more than 20 years as a practitioner, scholar, and researcher in human resource development. She works with organizations to maximize their productivity through training, organizational development, career planning, performance improvement interventions, strategic planning, and culture development. She has written on the links between human resource development and customer service quality, and on self-directed learning strategies. Dr. Wollard can be contacted at kkwollard@aol.com.