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Research and recommendations for employee engagement

Revisiting the employee-organization linkage

Lalatendu Kesari Jena and Sajeet Pradhan

Introduction

Several research findings support the fact that the top 20 per cent of multinational corporations with high engagement scores are consistently doing something different. For example, Toyota Motor's manufacturing plant in Georgetown, USA has an employee engagement level about 10 per cent higher than the US average. According to Peter Gritton, Vice-President (Admin–) at Toyota, the reason for their high levels of engagement can be attributed to the corporate culture that supports both individual creativity and team work (Bates, 2004). Gritton further emphasized, “[. . .] it is the responsibility of the management to support the employees and be committed to the overall success of both the employee and the company itself”. In addition to this, he insisted that to maintain consistently higher levels of engagement, management must develop employee trust on a daily basis. His message clearly emphasizes the importance of measuring employee engagement to gauge organizational health.

Although a considerable amount of research attention is paid to employee engagement, practitioners are continually searching for ways in which their workforce can be meaningfully engaged. Unfortunately, most of the extant literature has failed to differentiate employee engagement from other constructs like job satisfaction or employee emotional commitment toward their organization. It was also observed that organizations use terms like “employee engagement” and “retention” interchangeably. To address this misperception, this paper strives to offer a conceptual model that will offer clearer insight on employee engagement.

Genesis and growth of employee engagement

Engagement (derived from “in-gaj-ment”) measures the extent to which people value, enjoy, and believe in what they do. An overview of the key theories would include the following:

According to Kahn (1990), “engagement is a kind of psychological presence” of an employee while performing the assigned job. He further conceptualized work engagement as a kind of emotional, cognitive, and physical attachment toward one's job. Thus, a person who is engaged in the job will find the job motivating, is committed toward the work assignment, and will engage in meaningful professional relationships with other members of the organization (i.e. co-workers, subordinates, supervisor, and customers).

Rothbard (2001) developed a model of engagement consisting of two essential work components: attention and absorption. Attention refers to the amount of time one spends thinking about a role that one can do effectively, whereas absorption refers to immersing

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oneself to execute the given role. Engagement, therefore, is an individual's enthusiasm and involvement with one's job while fulfilling the work requirements through effective execution of the required role.

Schaufeli *et al.* (2002) characterized employee engagement as a work-related state of mind characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption.

May *et al.* (2004) correlated engagement with human spirit stating "[. . .] that seeks fulfillment through self-expression at work. It is believed that for the human spirit to thrive at work, individuals must be able to completely immerse themselves in their work". Therefore, it is confirmed that engagement is a psychological state by which employees' are emotionally and intellectually committed to their work assignment.

These ideas of engagement encompass both individual welfare and organizational level success. This is because engaged employees are:

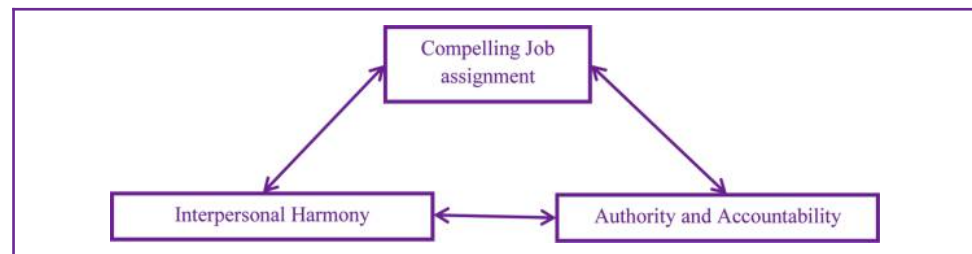
- highly energized and resilient professionals;
- putting their heart and soul into their job;
- exhibiting strong work involvement; and
- experiencing feelings of significance, passion, and excitement.

Exploring the elements of employee engagement

Employee engagement is no longer an abstract and theoretical concept. Today, we can clearly measure both its presence and intensity and even can demonstrate its value to an organization in more concrete terms. Research conducted by Harvard Business Review reported employees ranking "feeling of accomplishment that one gets from work" as a more important motivator than pay (Harter and Adkins, 2015). This validates our assertion that an engaged employee is more concerned about the meaningfulness of their work and the significant effect it will have on organizational performance. Pink (2011) states that people are driven by "autonomy, mastery, and purpose" rather than just meeting their basic physiological needs. Thus, we propose that engagement comprises three important dimensions (Figure 1. below) which are significant and meaningful to the employee:

1. *Compelling job assignment*: Employees feel engaged when the job they perform serves a greater purpose and is meaningful to them. Thus, job salience offers them a sense of accomplishment and empowerment. Compelling job assignments are defined as jobs that make a difference or leave an impact on all the stakeholders of the organization.
2. *Authority and accountability*: The absence of either of these two factors can be catastrophic, as authority without accountability may lead to abuse of power, and accountability without authority will curtail the effectiveness of the employee as they may not be able to make critical decisions.
3. *Interpersonal harmony*: Several researchers have emphasized how crucial interpersonal harmony is to the health, well-being, and performance of an employee. Interpersonal

Figure 1 Three dimensions of employee engagement



Employee engagement reflects the growing significance of human capital and the psychological involvement of employees at work.

harmony refers to the positive and healthy relationships built with colleagues, supervisors, subordinates, and customers.

Employee engagement is a positive work attitude where an individual goes above and beyond the call of duty, so as to elevate the level of ownership, and to further the organizational interest as a whole. It is regarded as the yardstick that determines the association of the individual employee with the workplace. Employee engagement reflects the growing significance of human capital and the psychological involvement of employees at work. Organizations are forced to maximize output by expending minimum input. To achieve that, organizations need to engage the physical, mental, and spiritual self of every individual employee.

Conclusion

Employee engagement is a positive attitude held by individuals toward their organization and its culture. A truly engaged employee is one who is aware of the business context, and works with all stakeholders to enhance both individual and organizational performance. The onus lies with both the organization (which must create a culture conducive to developing and nurturing engagement) and individuals who should align their personal goals with organizational goals by going beyond the job description.

Keywords:
Engagement,
Authority and accountability,
Compelling job assignment,
Interpersonal harmony

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