Survey In Role And Value of Employee Engagement In Organizations

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	Employee engagement is the level of commitment and involvement an employee has towards their organization and its values. In essence, companies strive for engaged employees because they are those who work longer hours, try harder, accoplish more and speak positvely about their organizations. This paper explores the differences and similitudes of how four HR professionals use diverse strategies, and the approaches they implement, to engage employees and increase involvement; an extense literature review is supportive of the results.

INTRODUCTION

Employee engagement in many ways can be considered a repackaged term for what human resources professionals and business leaders over the years have called motivation, passion, and employee commitment [7]. It is believed that the focus on engagement is a direct result of the several economic challenges that faced the United States starting in 2000. Beginning with the dotcom bubble bursting and September 11th, the nation saw a significant and detrimental rise in unemployment rates and disengaged employees [7]. As a result, the U.S. workforce has seen a remarkable rise in employee engagement initiatives ranging from surveys to in-house workshops. Any organization that wishes to remain competitive in today's global work environment must pay attention to the level in which its employees are engaged.

Leaders responsible for implementing employee engagement initiatives are on the quest to find the Holy Grail of how to attract and retain high performing talent. An article in T + D magazine stated that, "Engagement is all about creating a culture where people do not feel misused, overused, underused, or abused" [7]. One of the greatest challenges associated with employee engagement is how there is no clear cookie cutter solution for creating an engaging environment. What may increase one employee's engagement may actually have the opposite affect on another's. However, since employee engagement has been linked to such business outcomes as productivity, profits and customer satisfaction [6], HR professionals and business leaders should not be disillusioned by the challenge of creating the best possible work environment for its employees.

Elements of Employee Engagement:

Employee engagement can be broken into three different categories: the organization's culture, the employees' jobs, and the employees themselves [12]. Within each of these categories there are different components that play a critical role in the creation of a highly engaging work environment. However, it is the combination of how these categories come together that will lead in the end to the greatest level of engagement.

Organization culture. A culture that is rich with integrity and authenticity as well as a clear dedication to the company values is critical for engaging employees. In addition, there needs to be a sense of camaraderie and support amongst employees. Being respected and appreciated and having a sense of balance also play a role in

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an employee's level of engagement [12]. Understanding how the organization's culture can influence the level of which one feels engaged is key to creating a work environment that harnesses engaging energy.

The employees' jobs. In addition to the surrounding culture, understanding how a person's job design and specifically the job design characteristics such as autonomy and skill variety have on engagement is critical [12]. The way a job is designed can impact one's sense of empowerment and desire to learn new things, all of which impact employee engagement.

The employees themselves. Lastly, it is important to understand the role the individual employees themselves play in creating an engaging environment. Employees that have a strong sense of self and accomplish tend to feel more engaged then those that do not [12]. In addition, the extent to which the employees themselves are resilient to change and can flex in times of need also plays a role in the extent that they feel engaged.

Although understanding how the organization's culture, employees' jobs, and employees themselves impact employee engagement, the biggest challenge for HR professionals and business leaders is to match the proper employees with the proper job roles and culture. Understanding individual differences and the different needs of the different individuals is critical for HR professionals to make a successful match. Only when the right people are matched with the right companies and job roles will they experience optimal levels of engagement.

What Human Resources Professionals Are Doing About Engagement:

A team of researchers interviewed four HR professionals from the Southern California area to find out what their organizations are doing to keep their employees engaged and to close the gap on mis-matching employees in their organizations. A summary of the interview findings will follow.

Director of Talent Management from a global pharmaceutical company:

This company has a total of 50,000 employees and the employee who was interviewed sits on corporate talent management leadership team. Based in San Diego, the interviewee is aligned to one of the major divisions, Clinical Technologies and Services, which is comprised of 8,000 people. This department handles medical related devices. The interviewee spends most of the time doing OD tasks, is seen as the head of leadership, and is slightly involved in staffing. A major part of the job is supporting employee engagement through surveys, which are given to the employees. The goal is for the results from the surveys to meet a numerical target; 72% for manager effectiveness, 73% for employee engagement. One particular survey that the interviewee is currently supporting is the Voice of the Employees (VOE). This is an employee engagement survey given to all (50,000) employees. It was administered late last year, and is currently in the data analysis, feedback, and action-planning phase. The interviewee's role is to facilitate the implementation of the plan with the division leads. The interviewee was asked how the company deals with those that are not engaged. First, they need to identify them. Stakeholder analysis which identifies individuals or groups that is more or less supportive than usual. A survey is then able to identify position, tenure, and gender, so that the action steps can be customized to the different groups. There are many senior level employees involved in this, including the president and leadership team. This was originally planned to be executed by lower levels, but the President decided that it needed to come from the top since he believed that there needed to be executive sponsors to create buy-in amongst the employees. This company has displayed the significance and effectiveness of surveys and how the results are tailored to develop programs which address issues, such as employee engagement, in this case.

Learning Specialist in the Learning and Development HR department of a global:

pharmaceutical company. This pharmaceutical company encourages employee engagement by implementing various activities and programs. Employees are not required to attend these programs or activities, but are encouraged to the extent that it is understood amongst employees that it is expected for them to participate. One such program is called HoHo's, which occur every Friday evening. The company provides free food, beverages, and gives the employees a chance to socialize and make new friends. The company also holds company-wide celebrations in honor of corporate milestones. The company also sets up teams of HR professionals to support employees when the company is undergoing major changes. This shows that the company is pro-active in their methods. The company also hands out t-shirts, cups and other products, which have the company's logo on them. This shows that the company has company pride, which they encourage amongst the employees. The company also has a Café, which is the central place for lunch, and breaks. The tables and chairs are set-up in a way that the employees are "forced" to interact with each other. Employees are not able to seclude themselves, which encourages interaction amongst employees. Last, the company is very active in terms of learning and development. There are specialists from this department who ask employees what their development plan is; where do you see yourself in five years? The employees share their plan with these specialists who in turn ask the employee what the company can do for them to attain this goal (i.e. classes,

seminars, and workshops). This company is utilizing programs, counseling, structural planning, and products which all raise employee engagement amongst their employees.

Human Resources analyst at a public organization:

The Human Resource department has 14 people, and the company has 2,500 employees. The interviewee has been working for this company for one year and a half, but has eight years of experience in the field. Some challenges faced by this organization are interacting with the employees, whom all have different personalities, and addressing their issues. In the interviewee's opinion, employees are self-motivated to go to work every day because they studied the profession, they like it, they are professionals, and because of the money. Besides the financial motivation, the company offers employees growth within the organization and career development opportunities. Another motivating factors are the benefits, such as retirement at 55 years of age with a great pension. For example, a person retiring after 30 years working for the county can retire with a pension of 81% of their paycheck at retirement. Other benefits include medical and legal help provided at no cost. The culture of the HR department a diverse one, with a great variety of people and positions, and this variety is used to the organization's advantage to develop a cohesive and successful team.

Senior Manager at a Health service company:

The interviewee is responsible for the daily operations of the outpatient clinic. Development, implementation, monitoring, and supervising the department's policies and procedures, performance of appraisals on the staff, ensuring that clients are getting the services that they need, and handling grievances that are filed against staff members makes up the interviewee's responsibilities as well. There are 350 people in the department, and the interviewee has been working for 19 years with the company. The challenges that he/she faces are dealing with patient's rights, making sure that personnel provide services to the targeted population (the mentally ill), unmotivated staff, employees not complying to new procedures, and to having to make sure that regulations and policies are implemented. The interviewee motivates or engages employees by providing mentoring, counseling, supportive to needs, as well as encouraging them to achieve goals and meet expectations. Teamwork is expected to empower subordinates as well. The interviewee feels that the organization struggles with keeping employees engaged on a daily basis due to cuts and budget allocations, which puts the fear of layoffs amongst the employees. This results in a motivation conflict within the personnel and the pressure of working harder and smarter is felt so that they can keep their job. Aside from financial motivation, the employees are motivated by the company organizing retreats, which provide staffing the direction that the department is going and get employees involved in the decision-making process. The company also organizes different "get togethers", such as the Employee Appreciation Luncheons, which take place on a yearly basis. These luncheons are intended to show appreciation to employees' performance. They also have a Christmas party, Valentine's Day party, and occasionally take the clerical staff, case managers, and supervisors to dinner, where every employee is welcomed to attend in order to build stronger relationships and expand networking. The company also holds regular meetings, which are centered around employee engagement where they discuss the issues that are arising. Majority vote is what makes the decision at these meetings. Regarding diversity in employee engagement, the interviewee said there is not that much diversity at the organization but they have developed policies and procedures, which address religious beliefs, dress codes and cultural beliefs. The interviewee is certain that this is the best approach to avoid conflicts and issues amongst employees. When it comes to motivating disengaged employees, the company provides adequate resources, benefits, motivational training programs, empowerment, and delegation of responsibilities, recognition, and bonding. These are just a few approaches, which are used to motivate and engage employees.

Discussion:

We have summarized the different approaches and strategies used for HR professionals to improve employee engagement. The idea termed as 'employee engagement', which HR consultancy Towers Perrin defines as the "extent to which employees put discretionary effort into their work, beyond the required minimum to get the job done, in the form of extra time, brainpower or energy," is of major importance for the performance of an organization [3]. There is evidence that HR professionals are responding to employee engagement by flattening their chains of command, providing training and improving internal communications. They agree that changes on employee engagement will not happen overnight; therefore, they keep working in order to achieve their goals.

According to Phil Gerbyshak (2007) if managers want to build a great team that makes a huge impact on the bottom line of the company, there is a need to get employees engaged and loyal. At a local level, managers can influence employees' most basic needs by setting clear expectations and providing needed resources. Moreover, they can energize their employees by showing them that they care, personally and professionally. Personally, managers can create a meaningful relationship within workgroups and position employees so that

they can do what they do best. Professionally, managers can provide challenging work and opportunities to learn, grow, and make significant contributions [4].

Studies have statistically demonstrated that engaged employees are more productive, more profitable, more customer-focused, safer and less likely to leave their employer. According to Lockwood (2007), employees with the highest level of commitment perform 20% better and are 87% less likely to leave the organization, which indicates that engagement is linked to organizational performance.

Recent research has focused on developing a better understanding of how quality of work relationships and values of the organization interact and their link to important work outcomes. According to the interviewees' responses, criterion, and experiences there was a need to classify individuals and identify their pros and cons as an employee. A study done by the Gallup Management Journal has shown that only 29% of employees are actively engaged in their jobs. The Gallup Management Journal identified 3 different categories of employees in terms of engagement. The first one is engaged employees, who work with passion and feel profound connection to their company. They drive innovation and move the organization forward. The second category is not-engaged employees, who are sleepwalking through their workday, putting time but not energy or passion into their work; essentially 'checked out'. The third category is actively disengaged employees, and refers to those who are not just unhappy at work, but are busy acting out their unhappiness [2]. Every day, these workers undermine what their engaged coworkers accomplish.

Engaged employees work with passion and feel a strong connection to their company. This is ultimately what our interviewees keep striving to accomplish. They indeed focus on the employee, because they believe the employee is a key factor on the performance of an organization. Therefore, they try to keep employees engaged by empowering them, delegating responsibilities, making them actively participate in the decision-making processes that take place within the organization, and by giving them benefits or incentives.

When the concept of employee engagement first emerged, there was apprehension among HR professionals, line managers, and researchers over the connection between the levels of engagement of an employee and the quality of their work. In essence, employee engagement requires a realistic employee value proposition from the Human Resource function in an organization, because HR's values-add is integrally linked to or influenced by its employee value proposition. Human Resources' value-add will certainly be judged by how it builds and maintains employee engagement and commitment, and how it positions itself as a key driver in this process [11]. It is therefore, the role of HR professionals to understand and determine what drives engagement.

The interviewed HR professionals have participated in different strategies and techniques to add value to employees and to their positions within the organization. However, they realize that there are no guidelines to follow to keep employees engaged. Two recent informal surveys of IABC members, specializing in employee communication, show that organizations worldwide are realizing that even in a crisis good communication keeps employees engaged and the organization moving forward. According to these surveys, the most important element in maintaining employee engagement in a difficult situation is open, honest communication. Open communication allows leaders to demonstrate that they understand the problem and that are prepared.

The interviewees have stressed the responsibility that they carry as leaders and as managers of their organizations. Moreover, they are aware that employee engagement comes through effective leadership and management. In order to respond to their employee's needs and desires they hold a diverse number of activities that motivate their employees and trigger engagement.

In essence, there is clear evidence that high levels of employee engagement keenly correlate to individual, group and corporate performance in areas such as retention, turnover, productivity, customer service and loyalty [10], hence the importance HR professionals place on employee engagement.

It has been shown in this report that there is a great variety of ideas about what employee engagement is and how to accomplish it. Although there are no rules or guidelines to follow that will lead to employee engagement in every organization, there are strategies that companies are implementing to accomplish that goal. For example, QUALCOMM has developed a system to minimize turnover of new employees at their corporation by making it easier for them to get acquainted with the company's culture. They use a "52-week storytelling" program in which employees get an email every week during their first year with a short story where other employees narrate the company's history; this way they have realistic expectations about what they need to be successful in the company, and the company's culture and values (A Story to Tell, 2005). This way, the company ensures that the employee will feel part of that ongoing story and will know the company better, creating a sense of family and togetherness. QUALCOMM serves as an example of how important it is to develop communication and make new employees feel welcomed, two techniques that increase employee engagement.

One reason why it is so difficult to define employee engagement and create guidelines for organizations to follow is because organizations have different cultures, and as a result, they have different needs. HCA Healthcare Inc. is an example of this. The company tried increasing employee engagement by using research

findings, but nothing worked until they began listening to employees and created their own motto: "Speak, Listen, Act" [8].

Several companies are developing questionnaires intending to provide organizations with tools to evaluate and assess their employees' engagement, but employee engagement has to be carefully studied in each organization individually. Each one of the organizations for which the interviewees work, and other companies discussed in the literature, exemplifies the diverse range of actions that an organization can take to get their employees engaged. The variable that is seen consistently as helping increase employee engagement is two-way communication which helps employers know their employees, their needs and how to fulfill them. At the same time, company managers let employees know about them and see them as approachable human beings who care for them, creating a sense of loyalty.

Conclusion:

Having engaged employees is harder than it was in the past, when most people worked at one job all their lives or continued their parents' working line. Nowadays there is a competing workforce and there are competing organizations. Globalization and technology have changed the world and now it is easier for employees to look for another company that will give them the money they need, the benefits they want, or the respect they deserve. In the other hand, it is harder for companies to keep up with the changing workforce; turnover is expensive, so they need to retain employees. What is even more harmful to the company is that the good employees are the ones who have more opportunities to get another job, and the ones who the company needs to retain. This is the importance of employee engagement, that the best employees stay motivated at the company.

This study has shown that there are several definitions and perspectives about employee engagement, however, it has also shown that it is considered important for every organization to have an engaged workforce and that engagement is about motivated employees who feel connected with their organization. Employee engagement has been proved to be directly related to the bottom line of organizations, to business results, so it is an investment that will definitely bring positive results.

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