



Understanding Employee Engagement

by Thomas Dullien

Employee engagement is probably not a fad – at least not in the sense that it will come and go quickly. Having said that, we can now turn to the important questions: Why is everybody talking about it and why doesn't it work?

Some may remember the Hawthorne Study, where, in the 1920s, a series of experiments tried to achieve a higher productivity by improving the lighting during the night shift in Western Electric's plant. The so-called "Hawthorne effect" worked like magic – the productivity increased when the lighting was changed.

Initially it was hailed as a breakthrough determinant: "Improved working conditions lead to improved employee motivation and to increased productivity." Ultimately they realized, however, that whenever employees feel observed or 'paid attention to' they will increase their productivity. It actually improved every time the lighting was changed, including when it went back to the initial lower level.

Nonetheless, it started the avalanche of motivational theories and studies, most prominently Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. So, why would this matter in 2019? Because a close relative of motivation, its trendy cousin employee engagement (EE) is a \$230 billion industry that occupies the most prominent spots in magazines and conferences.

Is Employee Engagement the Same as Employee Motivation?

The field of organizational behavior has generated a huge body of work about the complex reasons why people exert effort on specific activities. These stretch from the horribly simple and wrong Needs Theory by Maslow to the startling mathematical theories by Clark Hull that very few understand.

Employee engagement has replaced employee motivation as a new flavor of the day, rather than being a superior concept. That wouldn't be much of a problem except that we've acted like employee engagement is newfangled, and we disregarded what we should have learned from study and research from the last hundred years.

We should have learned that the factors that influence Employee Engagement are the Hygiene Factors, as defined by Herzberg's Two Factor Theory in the 1950s and 60s. He explained the two factors that increase effort or performance, or, when they are removed, decrease performance. In neurological terms: adding unexpected rewards increases efforts and removing rewards or offering expected rewards decreases efforts.

In short, we didn't need to replace employee motivation with employee engagement. It just confused people and created an entire industry that makes lots of money from organizations that could spend it more effectively.

What is Employee Engagement?

While there is really no unified definition of employee engagement, there are three basic directions:

Employee feelings: Many of the various employee satisfaction surveys try to capture positive feeling or feelings of loyalty towards an organization. They fail, however, by not showing a corresponding behavior. Employees can work very hard to prove they are worthy, but still harbor anger and frustration for not being considered during the last promotion. Negative feelings are not necessarily reflected by poor performance. Just because there may be a correlation between satisfaction scores and business impact, doesn't make it a cause and effect.

Employee behavior: It is quite possible that employees' behavior seems to indicate that they are loyal, dedicated and engaged, but that does not mean it is genuine or authentic. Many employees see their job as a means to achieve a certain economic end. They do their work towards that end and their performance is good enough to maintain their position. These employees, however, will not elevate the organization to the next level, because they are not even remotely engaged. Just because there may be a correlation between satisfactory behavior and business impact, doesn't make it a cause and effect.

Employee perceptions and thoughts: We know from research on the effects of rewards that the perception about the reward is more important than the size or value of the reward. If the perception exists that the reward is given to manipulate the employee into working harder, then the reward is discounted, and has very little positive impact. It may even have a negative impact on performance. If the reward is given without ulterior motive, then the reward has a much bigger effect on the employee's positive feelings and behavior. Just because there may be a correlation doesn't make it a cause and effect.

Employees Recognize Manipulation

Virtually all EE programs try to get employees to contribute more to the bottom line. While there are legitimate attempts to make the workplace a better place, employees aren't stupid. They know that the company is spending money on these programs to squeeze out more effort. Employee engagement isn't about doing the right thing, although it may be the right thing to do. It's about increasing revenues, market shares, and profitability. Just because there may be a correlation doesn't make it a cause and effect.

Spending money and resources on employee engagement programs is simply an indirect path to the desired business goals of higher productivity and improved business results. Would it not be better to invest directly in the things that count? We know from research about motivation that specific, personal, and genuine recognition is an important aspect of making work more meaningful for employees.

This allows us to seek an alternative. Rather than continuing to invest in employee engagement programs, we can invest directly by improving how our organization recognizes those achievements. How about hiring more employees to reduce stress, allow more schedule flexibility, explaining why and how meaningful the contributions are to the organization?

Does Research Show Employee Engagement Works?

When, or better ‘if’, we actually read the voluminous research reports, particularly those from reputable firms, there are seldom plausible explanations that the business success may actually cause EE improvement, not the reverse. Is it because the research companies also sell products and services that are marketed to organizations believing that EE causes improved performance? Research, that links employee engagement and

business outcomes, categorizes people in these categories: engaged, unengaged, and actively disengaged.

It really doesn’t get any simpler. Do they really capture the complexity of human performance and motivation/engagement? Of course not. However, this simplification makes it easy to understand, and simplicity is the main appeal of the concept.

What is the Solution?

For starters, it is not a numbers’ game on score cards. The numerical expression of how much employee engagement is based in the individuals’ own characteristics, versus how much by what the company does, is anybody’s guess.

But organizations can actually control many of the factors that affect employees’ desire to work hard for them. But this is done through compassionate people, management through trust, leadership through R.E.W.A.R.D. and most importantly a culture that reflects and promotes the “three R’s” – respect, reciprocity, and relations.

Is there a most important factor that determines or makes you perceive your work as valuable and meaningful to you? Are they isolated big things, or is your awareness of your situation influenced by hundreds of little interactions, day by day, hour by hour, with management, co-workers, guests, players, vendors, etc.?



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These so-called micro-factors gradually shape our motivation. Examples: when your fellow employee showed empathy, or you appreciate a particular decision making process, or your freedom to negotiate in an unconventional and dynamic way. It's the sum of those experiences that form our perceptions and our level of motivation or engagement.

Which EE Software has the Best Algorithms?

To process the multitude of diverse micro-factors may require the most sophisticated software available to date – it comes with 86 to 96 billion neurons that operate several hundred trillion connections through ten trillion synapses at a speed of 220 mph and performs 1,016 calculations per second. Yes, it does consume 20% of our body's oxygen and glucose. But it only uses the energy of a 60-watt lightbulb. It is better known as the "brain." Unknown to most of us is the fact that we also have a second brain. Technically known as the enteric nervous system, the second brain consists of sheaths of neurons embedded in the walls of the long tube of our gut, or alimentary canal, which measures about nine meters end to end. The second brain contains some 100 million neurons, more than in either the spinal cord or the peripheral nervous system, says Michael Gershon, an expert in the nascent field of neurogastroenterology. Thus equipped with its own reflexes and senses, the second brain can control gut behavior independently of the brain.

This also means that gut feelings are really not a bad thing.

To impact the behavior of people, we must not just change policies, or institute new programs. If we want managers to manage more effectively to solicit engagement, we may need to have management change how they delegate mindfully, set goals realistically, appreciate employees timely, and make work much more meaningful for every working human being.

The Gallup 12 factors, in their effort to affect employee engagement, clearly suggest that employee engagement improves if employees can realize a sense of meaning in their work. That's not new, of course, and we've known it for decades, but it seems remarkably simple. It would be a huge mistake to think that all we have to do is address the Gallup 12 factors – the elements that impact engagement. It's a massive task when we break it down into the pervasive behavioral changes in the workplace on part of management, employees, procedures, culture, in fact everything in the organization. Ultimately, employee engagement or motivation still means that we need to understand what and how we need to modify in order to increase the meaningfulness of work. ♣

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