

# Human Resource Management

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## **Viewpoint**

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## Employee engagement is a two-way street

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**S**uccessful organizations recognize that employee retention and talent management are integral to sustaining their leadership and growth in the marketplace. Creating a retention-rich organization that attracts, engages and builds lasting loyalty among the most talented employees is a key to success in the modern globalized economy.

### What is an engaged employee?

An engaged employee is willing and able to contribute to company success. Put another way, engagement is the extent to which an employee puts discretionary effort into his or her work, beyond the required minimum to get the job done, in the form of extra time, brainpower or energy.

Kahn (1990) defined engagement at work as "harnessing organizational members' selves to their work roles". Engaged people employ and express themselves physically, cognitively and emotionally as they perform their roles.

The notion of flow, which Csikzentmihalyi (1975) advanced, is also related to employee engagement. Csikzentmihalyi defines flow as the "holistic sensation" that people feel when they act with total involvement. Flow is the state in which there is little distinction between self and environment. When individuals are in the state of flow, they need little conscious control for their actions.

An engaged employee is aware of business context and works with colleagues to improve performance within the job for the benefit of the organization. The organization must work to develop and nurture engagement, which requires a two-way relationship between employer and employee.

### Employee engagement and customer service

In these days of intensive focus on customer satisfaction, employee-engagement programs are seen as a key element on the journey to "customer service through operational excellence". As an employee becomes more engaged, he or she becomes less likely to leave the company and more concerned to meet the customer's needs. This is most evident in a service business. An engaged employee concentrates on giving the customer a reason to return, thus building customer loyalty over time. However, even in a business where there is little direct contact between employees and customers, engaged employees can still indirectly affect revenue growth – for instance, by supporting other employees who do have direct contact with customers, or by pioneering an innovation that boosts sales.

### Key drivers of employee engagement

Research shows that committed employees perform better. If we accept, as many believe, that engagement is one step up from commitment, it is clearly in the organization's interests to understand the drivers of engagement.

Both pay and benefits can motivate workers – to an extent. But raising compensation and offering more benefits are not, by themselves, effective drivers of employee engagement. Corporate cultures characterized by teamwork, pleasant working conditions, the considerate treatment of employees, growth opportunities, skill enhancement and

abundant training opportunities can all contribute to employee engagement. Employees' belief that they have a future with their employer is a leading driver of employee commitment, which is a recognized precursor to engagement.

It makes good business sense to provide flexible-working opportunities and appropriate policies for employees. It helps companies to retain skilled employees, raise employee morale and minimize absenteeism. Organizations that help their employees to work in a way which best supports them in balancing their work and home environments are more likely to have engaged employees.

The talent game is in constant flux as shifts take place in people's work ethics, favored means of communication, career expectations and so on. Leaders and managers, in response, need constantly to be adapting their approach to employees. Companies' efforts to engage workers will increasingly depend on organizations' ability to cater to employees' individual preferences – perhaps, even, to the extent of creating a choose-your-own menu of motivation and retention programs. The drivers of engagement also seem to vary from one workplace to the next, necessitating a customized approach.

### Conclusion

Having a fully engaged employee is a win-win situation. Engaged employees stay longer and contribute in a more meaningful way. The term "employee engagement" may sound new, but it has long existed as a core management practice. In today's competitive environment, companies need to ensure that, in philosophy and practice, they acknowledge the importance of the manager in retaining employees. A highly engaged workforce is the sign of a healthy organization, whatever its size, geographical location and economic sector.

### References

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