



The Art of Employee Engagement

Jonathon Hogg, Head of People and Talent at PA Consulting Group, explains why successful employee engagement means treating your staff just as well as your customers

There's quite a complicated set of relationships that you seek to manage when tackling engagement. One of the challenges organisations face is that they sometimes think everyone is the same and have similar attitudes and perspectives, but it couldn't be further from the truth. In reality organisations are made up of all sorts of people, so you need a multi-pronged approach.

There isn't one thing, or a series of standard things, that'll work because the landscape is much more complicated than we think. Yet, that doesn't mean there aren't clear objectives.

For me, experience, value, fairness and clarity are some of the inherent things that you're trying to sort out with engagement. In essence, companies need to ask what

things tend to wind people up, because that's where they lose commitment.

It's about listening to your workforce and often traditional methods aren't enough. Take employee engagement surveys, which tend to be very periodic, usually annual. By their nature, people often aren't given the opportunity to give an honest response and some companies ▶

will only ask questions that they know they want to hear the answer to. We also notice that some work the process to achieve more favourable engagement scores, which isn't hugely helpful.

There are alternatives. Some companies scrape data on what is being said on social media, both by existing and former employees. If you do that across platforms and jobsites, such as Glassdoor, you'll see patterns forming in what people are saying. You'll often get a more honest, and thankfully not always negative, insight.

We did this for a high street coffee company and found that staff, many of whom are students, are motivated by receiving free food that, being close to its sell-by-date, would otherwise be thrown away. The company wouldn't have picked up on that with an internal survey and decided not to do away with the freebies as planned.

Often there is too much focus on set questions with measurable answers. Similarly, organisations sometimes misconstrue engagement for communication, yet it's much broader than that. It's something your employees feel.

It's a case of knowing why you're there, what the business is for and having a clear sense of purpose. But it's also about believing in the company's goals and really wanting to achieve them.

Communication is just a vehicle, but it's essential in delivering an understanding of what that purpose is. Get the tone right, get the clarity right and make sure that your managers and leaders always explain things in a simple way, without being patronising and without corporate jargon.

“Companies are looking at how to use wearables... to build engagement”

One company we've worked with has quite a transient workforce consisting mostly of students who work for the summer and leave. The company, which has high engagement scores, said a simple message was vital to them. One of their mantras was: 'Say it like you would down the pub.'

THE ETIQUETTE OF COMMUNICATION

Simple communication is paramount to having an engaged workforce, but it's also about how you deliver that message. We're seeing companies communicate through methods such as Yammer, Facebook and instant messaging, and eventually we'll be using wearables to communicate with staff, but increasingly employees are asking for a face-to-face conversation.

There's a danger that companies get too excited about electronic communication and forget the importance of one-to-one interaction, which shows an investment of time on a personal level. There is more humanity in that conversation.

When you do use electronic communication, it's important to apply common etiquette. For example, if your CEO sends you a

message on your phone, it's very different to if they had sent you a work email. It would be seen as intrusive.

Research shows that millennials are much more open to a 24-7 way of working because they're always switched on and communicating. So, there is a temptation for companies to communicate to them beyond nine to five, but businesses need to be cautious about pushing that because people do get overloaded and there is a benefit in providing people with rest time.

Some organisations are providing tech free spaces where you can't use your mobile phone. There is even an argument that such devices are a distraction and can destroy creativity.

This doesn't mean going back to the Stone Age but understanding how best to use technology. A lot of companies are looking at how to use wearables, predominantly smart watches, to build engagement in the workplace, and understanding that they can deliver a number of benefits beyond communication.

For example, they can provide access to security levels or health monitoring that can tell if your staff member is too close to something dangerous. One of the ways we're looking to use this is in helping people to embed change. A common problem with change is that you internalise the idea, say during a workshop, but then forget to put it in action. Wearable technology can be used to give daily reminders, tips, or even competitions so that you can make that behaviour more habitual.

We need to understand our workforce to engage them, but the onus is not on ▶

them to become motivated, that is the organisation's responsibility and it must be tackled consistently at all levels. For example, if the quality of the staff toilets is appalling and people have complained but the company refuses to invest in improvements, the boss shouldn't wonder why motivation is low. It's because it has become a symbolic issue. The employees don't trust the business because it's demonstrably not living up to its part of the bargain.

There are many similar situations in which companies have a blind spot and don't address something that could make a huge difference to the way people buy into the organisation.

It's about reflecting the company's values, which should include honesty, integrity

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and fairness. Throughout the duration of an employee's time with you, the firm must live up to those values and deliver them consistently. This is an issue where companies often fail, because they say one thing and do another.

Research shows that these principles are particularly important to millennials, who place emphasis on integrity but tend not to trust their leaders and CEOs. This is partly due to the spotlight modern media shines on unethical corporates and leaders, which was exemplified during the banking crisis.

Particularly in Western society, we are quite judgemental about fairness now. For example, a lot of social media storms are because people see something as unfair and react strongly against that. It's the same in organisations, which is one reason why companies need to make sure that there is a focus on corporate social responsibility, and at a more individual level, that there is a balance between monitoring goals and rewards.

Another modern phenomena led by millennials is the high level of expectation we see in the workplace. As consumers,

millennials expect a great deal from companies and those demands often extend into the work domain. Thinking of the employee experience as you would the customer experience is one trick that companies need to be savvy to.

Employees recognise that sometimes they get the raw deal. The customer gets the perks and an elegant environment while staff can get gloomy, run-down facilities. One hospitality company we worked with invested quite significantly in renovating its staff area, they did it in a fun way with bright colours and pictures. That had a huge impact symbolically as the employees recognised that the company was trying to make a difference.

The job for life is extinct. As such, companies must evolve to become just as competitive at keeping their staff as they are at retaining their customers, because let's face it, today's employees are also free to shop around. ■

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DISCOVERY COMMUNICATIONS

“It's really important to take time and listen to staff. You need to keep talking to catch things early. If there are rumblings of unhappiness, people start creating stories where there were none.

Learn who the influencers are in your organisation, engage with them and understand what they're seeing and what their fears are.

In my experience people want to know what we're trying to achieve together, how they can make a difference, what their role and responsibilities are and how they're doing with that. Actually, if you do all of those things, the rest of it is wrapping. ”



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