

Employee Engagement in an Industrial Setting

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Executive Summary

The present study was conducted to examine employee perceptions of and recommendations for improving employee engagement in the workplace. Using one-on-one interviews the author set out to examine and explore how employees in one industrial location perceived employee engagement and what, in the employees' opinions, can be done to help organizations improve engagement levels. The data collected helped the author form a definition of employee engagement as well as identify main contributors to engagement. Factors such as employee development and skill variety were identified as contributing factors of engagement in existing literature and, to some extent, among employees interviewed for this study. However, communication was identified as the central component to employee engagement throughout the interview process.

It is recommended that more focused research take place with regards to the impact of a communications strategy on employee engagement. The data collected during this study heavily favours communication as an engagement strengthening activity, but the author is aware that the study could benefit from a larger sample size than the four employees interviewed herein. Challenges involved in the data collection process and associated limitations of the study are also discussed.

Employee Engagement in an Industrial Setting

Woody Allen once said, “Eighty percent of success is showing up” (Wellins, Bernthal, & Phelps, 2005, p. 1). Over the years, employers have recognized the need to look beyond that pre-requisite for success. Organizational success is not measured by the number of employees who show up; it is measured by productivity and efficiency. Organizations are constantly searching for the ‘holy grail’ of engagement which will transform their workforce from employees simply ‘showing up’ to work, to a productive and efficient group of employees.

Engagement should be a ‘no-brainer’ when it comes to an organization’s desire to have a productive staff. Employee engagement has solicited widespread interest from managers and executives (Crawford, LePine, & Rich, 2010). Managerial interest seems to spawn from all the literature supplied by consultant agencies that link higher shareholder return, profitability, productivity, quality, customer satisfaction, and lower employee absenteeism to having engaged employees in the organization (Crawford et al., 2010). What tends to be the most debated item of employee engagement is its definition as one organization may classify something as engagement while another may not. In academic literature there have been many engagement variations proposed and debated. Similarly, numerous consultancies have provided their own definitions. This issue becomes more complex still. Once an organization figures out what they mean by the term “employee engagement”, the next question is how do you bring your employees to an engaged state of mind? What is the right mix of factors that will improve engagement? Is it improved benefits and salary? Would improved communication between senior management and the plant floor be a catalyst for improved engagement?

These are important questions to be raised in an organization's quest for improving employee engagement. The present study involved one-on-one interviews with employees to examine what engagement meant to them and gather their suggestions for its improvement.

Before describing the present study in detail, additional background information on employee engagement is necessary. In 2007 a working group was put in place by The Conference Board to look at the issue of employee engagement. That process involved 12 separate studies (Bates, 2004; Baumruk, 2004; CLC, 2004; Conf. Bd. 2003; Drizen (PAN), 2005; Gubman, 2004; Oakley, 2005; Richheld, 2001; Smythe, 2005; Towers, 2003; Towers-UK, 2005; Walker, 2005) ranging from academia to consultancy agencies. In four of those studies the following eight common engagement-enhancement factors were identified (Bates, 2004; Gubman, 2004; Towers, 2003; Towers-UK, 2005);

- 1) Trust and integrity
- 2) Nature of the Job
- 3) Line-of-sight between individual performance and company performance
- 4) Career growth opportunities
- 5) Pride about the company
- 6) Co-workers / team members
- 7) Employee development
- 8) Personal relationship with manager

Data collection methods for the above studies varied. The four studies which identified the factors summarized above (Bates, 2004; Gubman, 2004; Towers, 2003; Towers-UK, 2005) compiled their data from secondary sources for analytical purposes.

Three of the studies were conducted by consultant agencies with the fourth (Bates, 2004) being a senior writer for *HR Magazine*. The present study aims to take the data compiled from interviews with manufacturing employees to examine similarities and differences between their conceptualizations of engagement and its development, and current engagement literature such as those studies cited above. Findings and insights from both the interviews and engagement literature were meant to provide considerations for the focal company in the present study about options that may be available to help improve engagement levels in that organization.

Studies have shown that if an employee is interested and engaged in his or her job, he or she will likely perform at an elevated level which in turn will benefit the company in a number of areas such as safety (Williams, 2008), front line engagement (Fairhurst, 2008), and reduced attrition rates (Whittington & Galpin, 2010). In order to determine the level of an employee's engagement at work we must first define what engagement is. As noted previously, employee engagement can (and does) mean different things to different individuals. There have been multiple definitions of employee engagement offered by consultant agencies and academics over the years. The definitions include, but are not limited to;

- An individual's involvement and satisfaction with, as well as enthusiasm for, work (Gallop cited by Schneider, Macey, & Barbera, 2009, p. 23)
- A result that is achieved by stimulating employees' enthusiasm for their work and directing it toward organizational success (Hay Group cited by Schneider et al., 2009, p. 23)

- A heightened emotional and intellectual connection that employees have for their job, organization, manager or co-workers that in return influences them to apply additional discretionary effort to their work (Conference Board cited by Schneider et al., 2009, p. 23)
- A positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind that is characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption (Bakker, Albrecht, & Leiter, 2010, p. 5)
- The harnessing of organization members' selves to their work roles by which they employ and express themselves physically, cognitively, and emotionally during role performances (Kahn, 1990, p. 694)

Even though there are a number of definitions available for employee engagement, the common theme is connected to the employee's state of being. How the employee feels about what they do for the organization is one of the factors which determine his or her current state of being. The emotional connection an employee has with his or her job can be heavily influenced by any of the above engagement factors identified by the Conference Board. For example, if the employee does not feel a sense of trust or integrity on behalf of the company, their emotional state of purpose may be negatively impacted. For many employees, it is not worth it to put in extra effort for a company that does not have mutual respect and trust of its staff. Engagement can also be a result of the level of work being performed. An individual who may be overqualified for a certain position may find it difficult to be engaged in less challenging work. Conversely, if the employee is placed in a role that compliments their skill set and abilities the engagement level of the employee could be positively influenced. In the end, the Conference Board

factors act as tools which can be used to shape and influence an employees' state of engagement.

The importance of engagement is examined in depth throughout the literature; for example, Medlin and Green (2009) looked at enhancing performance through goal setting, engagement and optimism; Babcock-Robertson and Strickland (2010) examined the relationship between charismatic leadership, work engagement, and organizational citizenship behaviours; and Salanova, Agut, and Peiro (2005) looked to link organizational resources and work engagement to employee performance and customer loyalty. For the company, employee engagement has a tangible impact in a variety of areas. Towers Perrin (2003) found a significant positive correlation between companies' employee engagement levels and their one-year growth in total revenues compared to the average growth within their Dow Jones sector. In 2003 the Conference Board revealed a connection between employee engagement and customer service scores. They found that employees' customer service productivity scores and their employee engagement scores had a correlation of 0.51 (Gibbons, 2006). Hewitt (2004) conducted a longitudinal study where he discovered that when employee engagement levels increased, there was a corresponding increase in financial performance indicators. There have also been studies which show that engagement is associated with positive job attitudes (Harter, Schmidt, & Hayes, 2002), lower turnover (Bakker, Dermerouti, & Schaufeli, 2005) and higher levels of performance at the individual and unit levels (Harter et al., 2002). The research all points to the same desired outcome for companies; employee engagement improves (or is at least linked to) operational success. This being said, there are still a number of questions which are being asked regarding this area. While speaking at the Melcrum's

Strategic Communication Management (SCM) Summit in the UK, Wayne Clark offered the following questions for review, “What does engagement mean in today’s world? Is it still important? Why should we invest in engagement? Who should we engage and who’s responsible for doing so? How do we engage in today’s tough climate?” (2009, p. 1).

Drivers of Engagement

In order to realize the potential benefits of engaged employees in the workplace, managers must first determine what tools are to be used to encourage engagement. Studies have shown that job and personal resources facilitate work engagement (Bakker, Albrecht, & Leiter, 2011; Bakker & Demerouti, 2008; Bakker & Leiter, 2010). Job resources refer to the “physical, social or organizational aspects of the job that may reduce job demands, be functional in achieving work goals, or stimulate personal growth” (Bakker et al., 2011, p. 6). Job resources are viewed to be important as they are assumed to facilitate individuals’ intrinsic motivation as they help fulfill basic human needs such as the needs for autonomy, relatedness, and competence (van den Broeck, Vansteenkiste, de Witte, & Lens, 2008). After job resources, personal resources (or psychological capital) have been shown to be important predictors of work engagement. Psychological capital has been defined as;

“An individual’s positive psychological state of development that is characterized by four things; confidence, optimism, hope, and resiliency. Confidence means being able to take on and put in the necessary effort to succeed at challenging tasks. Optimism is making a positive attribution about succeeding now and in the future. Hope is persevering towards

goals and when necessary, redirecting paths to goals in order to succeed.

Resiliency means the ability to sustain and bounce back from problems and adversity to attain success.” (Luthans, 2007, p. 3)

This is where it starts to become clearer that in order to engage a workforce one must cater to his or her audience. Unfortunately, employee engagement is not an exact science. Every employee is different and thus requires a different form of motivation or engagement support. As discussed above, in order to be able to engage employees, there are a number of factors which need to be considered. Not all employees may respond to engagement techniques the same way. If one employee has a higher need for autonomy in his or her job, but at the same time displays a lower level of confidence or resiliency, then the methods for driving engagement need to reflect that combination of factors. This is an example of how dynamic employee engagement can be and the challenges it can pose.

Employee development plays an important role in engagement as it can show the employee the degree to which they feel that specific efforts are being made by their company to develop the employee’s skills. By working with the employee to develop their confidence level in their job, the organization is showing commitment towards ensuring the employee will succeed in the company which in turn can potentially increase engagement levels in the employee. Where some employees react well to intrinsic measures (development, pride, relationships) other employees react positively to cash incentives. Financial rewards mainly generate short-term boosts of energy (Dewhurst, Guthridge, & Mohr, 2010) but for a large percentage of the population incentives on their own are not enough (Saravis, 2011).

Development Dimensions International is a talent management company which was formed in 1970. DDI's approach to building higher levels of engagement is based on a number of fundamental beliefs. These beliefs were built and refined over three decades of research and experience within DDI;

- 1) Engagement is the primary enabler of successful execution of any business strategy
- 2) Engagement is not a short-term initiative
- 3) Engagement must be driven from the top
- 4) One of the best ways to have highly engaged employees is to hire them
- 5) Engagement is all about fit
- 6) No one impacts engagement more than an employee's immediate leader
- 7) Measuring engagement and demonstrating its business impact is crucial, but its only a small part of winning the battle
- 8) Engaging means reaching the heart.

Essentially, DDI is saying that companies and other organizations can impact engagement in their respective environments if they utilize the fundamentals (listed above) which are important to them. Every organization will place varying degrees of importance on different beliefs. Some organizations may place emphasis on *reaching the heart* of its employees, where other organizations focus more on the *top down* method of employee engagement. In deciding upon a strategy for engaging employees within a given organization, the perspectives of its own employees are likely an important supplement to more general considerations of the topic in published literature. The

purpose of the present study was to investigate employees' perspectives on what engagement is and how it can be improved in one industrial location.

Method

This study was meant to be exploratory in nature. The author was looking to solicit employee thoughts on the topic of engagement and how they viewed it in their work setting through an interview process. The author of this study is a manager within the focal company. Care was taken to ensure that participation was voluntary. None of the prospective participants reported to the author directly or indirectly. The author received signed approval from the Director of Operations and the Human Resources Manager to conduct this study within the manufacturing facility. The UPEI Research Ethics Board approved the research protocol for this study. Once approval was given, the author approached each Shift Manager and requested to speak to employees at a shift meeting in order to provide an outline of the study, discuss what the study was for, and solicit volunteers. It is believed that because of the author's employment status with the organization the participation level was not as high as it could have been (discussed below).

Participants

It was the intent of the author to solicit employee participation by meeting with employees in a shift meeting and providing some background on the study, its purposes as part of the author's MBA program requirement, and its anticipated contributions. Volunteer solicitation did not go as well as the author had hoped. In the end, a total of four employees volunteered for this study. The author attended multiple shift meetings attempting to increase the number of volunteers, but employee participation was not

forthcoming. It is thought that the author's managerial position in the organization hindered his ability to solicit volunteers. This was confirmed later when the author was approached by an employee and was told that his position within the organization was seen as a deterrent to participation. There had been previous work done on engagement in the organization, with both positive and negative outcomes. The author, as a relatively new manager in that organization, was not aware of all the previous initiatives taken or the outcomes of those projects. When the author started trying to solicit volunteers for the present employee engagement study, employees apparently viewed it as another attempt by the organization and few wanted to participate. During the shift meetings the author made it as clear as possible that this was not being completed on behalf of the company, but as a requirement for a graduate program. Efforts to actively recruit participants in a manner consistent with ethical considerations and the project protocol resulted in limited success.

Interview Procedure

The interview process involved meeting with four volunteers and conducting one-on-one interviews based on a set of questions which were developed by the author specifically for this study (Appendix A). Interviews were digitally recorded. The questions were designed to be progressive in nature. The author first wanted to establish how the employee viewed employee engagement by providing his or her own definition of the term. Once a definition was in place, the author was looking for the employee to explain the level of importance they place on engagement in an organization. By asking participants what they thought the importance of employee engagement was, the author was looking to compare employees' thinking to insights from existing literature. Next

the author hoped to gain an understanding of the personal side of employee engagement by asking the participants about their current level of engagement in the organization. This was followed by asking them if they view employee engagement as an issue within the focal company. In conclusion, each interviewee was asked what roles they think the company, the supervisor and the individual employee have to play in order to improve employee engagement. Once the interviews were completed, a summary of the data was placed into a table in order to facilitate thematic analysis across different questions and respondents. A summary of key findings is presented next.

Results and Discussion

The important aspect of engagement for any organization is to have a good sense of what definition employee engagement must have in order to assist in the development of the company culture. The purpose of this study was to help a local manufacturer develop its own definition which could serve as a focal point for efforts to enhance engagement. In order to influence engagement and to drive improvement within the company, an organization must first know what the point of reference or baseline for improvement is. It was this author's intention to clarify the meaning of employee engagement from the employees' perspective in order to assist the organization to be more successful. This study was meant to be exploratory in nature. The purpose was to see how floor-level employees conceptualized employee engagement and compare their perspectives to current research and ideas in published literature. At the same time, it was hoped that this study would reveal some opportunities to strengthen the engagement practices which are currently being utilized in the organization by considering both local employees' insights as well as published literature on engagement.

The study used qualitative methods to collect and analyze data. The author conducted in-person interviews with employee volunteers from the focal organization. By conducting interviews, it was hoped that the author would be able to focus on employee feelings and thoughts through a series of open-ended and probing questions designed to help clarify respondents' answers. The answers obtained through these interviews were then placed in a matrix and compared amongst one another for similarities. The identified themes and considerations for engagement management are discussed below. However, it is first important to recognize the challenges and key learning points associated with the research process.

Engagement is an intricate and important aspect of any organization's operation, and is often complicated to develop. This study did not generate the participation rate that the author had intended. The author visited each shift manager to arrange a time to meet the crews, sat in on shift meetings and described the study and its role in his graduate program in an attempt to solicit volunteers. Despite the recruitment efforts, a total of only four participants volunteered and were involved in the interview process. The organization where this study was conducted had a history of attempting different employee engagement techniques over the years. It is believed that the employees viewed the author's study as another attempt by the organization to increase engagement and they were reluctant to participate. The author of this study is a current manager within the focal company. This fact could help explain the views that the floor-level employees had pertaining to this study. The process of recruiting volunteer participants in an ethical manner proved both difficult and an important source of learning about the research process.

Despite the fact that the number of participants was lower than intended, this study does offer insights from employees about thoughts and feelings towards engagement. The interview opened with the following question;

- ***What does the term employee engagement mean to you?***
 - *What does an engaged employee do that a disengaged employee doesn't?*
 - *How would you define employee engagement?*

All four participants provided similar answers to both the question and its associated follow-up questions. One participant offered the following description of an engaged employee,

“...an engaged employee sees the benefits in helping the company and realizes that by helping the company secures himself a position in the company...”

(Interviewee #1)

Other participants defined employee engagement as,

“...engaged employees react without being forced to react...” (Interviewee #2)

“...employee engagement is active participation in one's job to benefit both themselves and the company by being part of the work culture...” (Interviewee #4)

In the literature review completed by the Conference Board there were twenty-six factors identified which determine the degree to which individuals will be engaged in the workforce (Gibbons, 2006). Throughout the twelve major studies which identified the twenty-six factors, eight factors were common to engagement in at least four of those studies. Five of the eight factors were identified during this study (Appendix B).

Appendix B illustrates how participants made common reference to three of the eight factors identified by the Conference Board. Interestingly, only participant #1 made reference to “Career Growth Opportunities” and none of the participants referred to “pride about their company” or looking forward to “employee development”. The Conference Board report which was authored by Gibbons (2007) offers the following definitions for pride, employee development and career growth

“Pride about the company refers to, the amount of self-esteem that an employee derives from being associated with his/her company. Employee development refers to, the degree to which an employee feels that specific efforts are being made by their company to develop the employee’s skills” Finally, career growth opportunities refer to, the degree to which an employee feels that there are future opportunities for career growth and promotion within the company” (Gibbons, 2007, p. 6).

Engagement using these three criteria is important to retaining talent in an organization. If an employee is engaged in what he or she does but does not see progression or development opportunities in the company, there may be an increased risk that the employee will look to another organization to fill those needs.

In addition to considering employees’ definitions of engagement and analysis of the engagement-development factors inherent in those definitions, interviewees were also asked explicitly to describe different methods an organization can use to engage its work force. As seen in Appendix C, all participants recognized and acknowledged that communication plays an extremely important role in the engagement of employees.

Everyone from the CEO (being the representative of the company on the whole) down to the employees themselves have to play a role in engagement.

Previous studies have shown that job resources such as social support from colleagues and supervisors, performance feedback, skill variety, autonomy, and learning opportunities are positively associated with employee engagement (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Bakker & Demerouti, 2008; Schaufeli & Salanova, 2007). While skill variety, autonomy, and learning are important in driving employee engagement, they were not themes that were discussed at length during the interview process. Skill variety was identified only by Interviewee #4; “A supervisor must understand his or her employees and assign projects based on skill ability and interest.” Communication was a clear theme throughout the data collection process. All participants concluded that communication is vital in fostering an environment that is conducive to employee engagement. Previous literature seems to support this finding with some of the above factors. Social support and performance feedback were identified during the interview process.

“...there needs to be a work/life balance. There are two lives for an employee, the work life and his home life.”(Interviewee #1 – Social Support)

“...if people don't know the state of the business, they do not feel engaged or connected to the company. Improved communication allows employees to become engaged because they know what they are working towards.”(Interviewee #3 – Performance feedback)

The importance of effective communication can be seen in influencing a variety of aspects in a company including employee engagement. In the National Football League, the most successful coaches are the ones who have developed meaningful relationships with their players using effective communication (Gordon, 2010). This same strategy can be utilized in the corporate setting. In order to have the employees aligned with the organizational goals, the strategy must first be communicated to the employees. The same strategy must be used when dealing with employee engagement. The employees must be aware of what is expected of them in order to help grow the company. An employee must have a solid sense of direction for him or her to be completely engaged in and dedicated to the company. To use another football analogy to illustrate, the team's offense is tasked collectively with the job of putting points on the board. In order to score the points the players need to have a sense of direction, a purpose to being out on the field putting their bodies through the trauma they endure. The offensive coordinator (manager) then communicates the play (the strategy) out to the field. The players (employees) must understand, buy into, and execute the strategy through their coordinated individual jobs in order to score (organizational goal). Thus, in order to be successful the manager must communicate the strategy for improving the company to the employees. Once they are informed, then engagement becomes easier as they know for what they are working towards.

Summary and Considerations

Taking into account that this study only included four participants, the insights revealed herein are not necessarily representative of all employees in the firm or at that particular location. It is the author's belief, however, that the opinions and thoughts

which were collected during the interview process are reasonably robust given their close connection to information observed within the engagement literature.

Further research in the area of communication strategies and their impact on employee engagement would go a long way in assisting companies in improving their engagement levels. Today, companies are focusing a lot of energy and resources on employee engagement; however, communication does not use up a lot of resources or capital. Communication is probably the cheapest form of engagement strategy open to employers. The author does concede that communication will occupy manager resources, but it is the belief that these are resources put to a good use. The key point is that once a communication plan has been initiated, it must be followed through with and kept consistent. If employees view communication as another ‘flavour of the month’ attempt by management to get employees involved, the plan is destined to fail. Having a clear definition on what employee engagement means to the organization is also important. The author developed the following definition of employee engagement using the data collected from the engagement interviews:

“Employee engagement involves the employee’s perceptions of the company as well as the desire to undertake tasks which are of a direct benefit to the organization without being directed or forced to do so. Such an employee sees the importance of succeeding for the company as at the end of the day, a successful company can result in an improved state for the individual employee through constant and timely communication, recognition (career progression) or benefits (health or monetary benefit).”

In closing, employee engagement is probably the most challenging aspect of an organization’s operation. As seen in the literature, companies are constantly on the

lookout for new techniques to help them improve the engagement levels within their organization. The diversity of the workforce today (gender, age, culture) along with economic conditions are constantly evolving thus making engagement even more vital for organizations striving for holistic success.

It would be interesting to see future studies take an in-depth look into the different communication strategies being utilized within different organizations. Specifically, it would be interesting to see how the level of communication relates to employee engagement levels within the company related to the success of the company. Herb Kelleher, founder and Executive Chairman of the Board of Southwest Airlines, said it best, *“If you create an environment where people truly participate, you don't need control. They know what needs to be done and they do it. We're not looking for blind obedience. We're looking for people who on their own initiative want to be doing what they're doing because they consider it to be a worthy objective.”* (Heathfield, 2011, p. 2)

Appendix A

Engagement Interview questions

- 1) What does the term employee engagement mean to you?
 - a. What does an engaged employee do that a disengaged employee doesn't?
 - b. How would you define employee engagement?
- 2) In your opinion, how important is employee engagement to a company?
 - a. Why is it important?
 - b. Why is it not important?
 - c. Can you provide examples of
- 3) How engaged are you in your current role?
 - a. If highly engaged...what about your current role makes you engaged?
 - b. If not highly engaged...what could be done to make you more engaged?
- 4) In your opinion, is employee engagement an issue here?
 - a. If yes, can you provide examples of employee actions which would lead you to believe it is an issue?
 - b. If no, what in your opinion is causing the employees to be engaged?
- 5) What do you think can be done to improve engagement among employees?
 - a. What is the most important thing a company can do to engage employees?
 - b. What other practices can a company use to engage employees?
 - c. What is the most important thing an individual manager or supervisor can do to improve employee engagement?

- d. What role does the individual employee have in his or her own engagement?
- 6) Do you have any closing comments or thoughts towards employee engagement that you would like to express?

Appendix B

	Participant 1	Participant 2	Participant 3	Participant 4
1 Trust and Integrity		Management must respect employees ideas	Management must deliver on actions promised	Unionized environment seems to discourage trust
2 Nature of the Job	employees must look after their area	engaged employees look after the small day-to-day	engaged employee come to work and look for improvements	Look for employee interests when assigning jobs
3 Line-of-sight between individual performance and company performance	Employees must be explained the business needs	engaged employees react quicker thus more efficient to company	engaged employees show commitment to further company goals	The use of KPI's to keep employees informed on company performance
4 Co-workers / Team members	disengaged employees can act like a poison to the workplace		engaged employees can help change disengaged employee	Older employees tend to be less engaged - influence new
5 Personal relationship with one's manager	must effectively communicate with supervisor	Manager must stimulate employees mind to engage	direct managers dictate how engaged an employee will be	Motivating employee is part of engagement

Appendix C

What is the most important thing that can be done to improve employee engagement by

	Participant #1	Participant #2	Participant #3	Participant #4
1) the company as a whole	Offer rewards - tangible reward - pat on the back (intrinsic)	Offer Benefits - Health and medical - Wage increase	Communicate in a consistent manner rewards system	Getting everyone involved in the operations (cross functional teams)
2) immediate supervision	Communicate strongly to reports	Respect the employees Communication is key	Communicate current state follow up is key	Cater to employee interests when assigning out jobs motivate properly
3) individual employee	Need to communicate issues to supervisor find proper work/home balance		Some employees are naturally engaged	Communicate what motivates employee to supervisor

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