

How and Why Staff Engagement Matters

A literature review to inform the engagement insight tool



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1 What is Employee Engagement

1.1 An Overview of Employee Engagement Literature

“The more of ourselves we give to a role, the more exciting and comfortable is our performance”

(Kahn cited in Bedarkar and Pandita, 2014, p.108)(1)

The concept of employee engagement was first introduced by Kahn's article on “The Psychological Conditions of Personal Engagement and Disengagement at Work” published in 1990 (10). This piece of work helped to set the foundations for the subsequent research in the field. Since then, the notion of employee engagement has been well explored both in the academic and practitioner literature. The latter is generally produced by consultancies and companies dedicated to understanding and finding ways of increasing the levels of employee engagement in organisations. To achieve this end large quantities of data have been generated on the topic, these run across countries and industries. The research using this information has led to consistent findings on the effect of engagement on organisational success.

1.2 What is Employee Engagement

The prolific production of literature on employee engagement that has occurred in the last two decades, the differences between the academia and practitioners approach, and the complexity of the concept itself, account for a lack of an unanimous definition or measurement of engagement (1). Instead, there are various employee engagement models, and a wide variety of definitions, that range from considering engagement as the full investment of one's self at work (Kahn, 1990) to a state characterised by vigor, dedication and absorption (Schaufeli, Salanova, González-Romá and Bakker, 2002) or a persistent positive affective state that is at the opposite side of a continuum which other end is burn-out (Maslach and Leiter, 1997). It is possible, however, to envision some common themes¹ in its definition:

- It is a work-related **psychological or affective state** (2,10) that is positive and fulfilling (42,43), and where there is a strong connection and involvement with one's work (both with the role and the organisation as a whole) (2,4,5) as well as a strong commitment with the organisation and its values (2,5).
- Where a person is **fully immersed, absorbed, focused at work and feeling energised, inspired, enthusiastic**, showing high levels of dedication, responsibility, initiative, vigor, and persistence at the face of challenges (2-4) and;
- In which people are **employing their whole selves at work** (10).

This last element is at the core of Kahn's seminal research and it is also part of the features that makes engagement distinctive from other concepts (i.e. organisational commitment, job satisfaction, flow). Engagement is related to the extent to which someone is employing their self at work (10). It is directly related to the expression of people's feelings, thoughts and identity in their work tasks and role demands. There is real choice for self-expression, personal voice and authenticity. Work outcomes reflect their preferred selves, how they think things should be or happen, as opposed to being entirely defined by others (9,10). The opposite occurs when people are disengaged from their work, as Kahn (1990) states:

“Personally disengaging means uncoupling self from role; people's behaviours display an evacuation or suppression of their expressive and energetic selves in discharging role obligations. Role demands guide task behaviours without the interplay between internal thoughts and feelings and external requirements that characterize moments of personal engagement” (10)(Kahn, 1990, p.701)(10)

Engagement is therefore related to complex human aspects such as identity, which requires understanding the employee not only in the role but as a whole (11), and as someone who is committing to a relationship with an organisation and a job in search of fulfilment (9). In this sense, the introduction of the employee engagement concept proposes an enriching and innovative way of perceiving the employee-organisation relationship. One that encourages organisations to explore the full potential of employees by considering how the specificities of their life experiences, talents, goals and beliefs guide their performance (11), as well as to explore the untapped potential of every interaction to create engagement (11).

1 A comparative table of employee engagement definitions developed in the academic literature is available at Daguer et al.(2015), p.241

Engagement is also distinctive in that it contains cognitive, emotional and behavioural components (2,5,6). The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (2007) in the UK explains these three dimensions as follows: "emotional engagement - being very involved emotionally with one's work, cognitive engagement - focusing very hard whilst at work [and] physical engagement - being willing to 'go the extra mile' for your employer." (5)(p.3). It is the translation of this positive work related state of mind in actual behaviours and role performance and organisational outcomes, what gives engagement its core importance, and turns it into "something the employee has to offer"(p.1)(5).

Employee engagement has also been defined in terms of its outcomes and the behaviours it triggers in employees (4). However, differentiating between what it is and what it results in is important both for the purpose of designing tools to measure engagement and informing organisations on how to improve it.

What does an engaged employee look like?

These are some features that are common in engaged employees:

- Losing track of time in a positive way i.e. not watching the clock (2,4), finding it easy to focus and resist distractions (3)
- Enjoying work challenges (2), feeling empowered and like they are "in control of their fate at work" (p.2)(12)
- Being physically energised at work (4,12)
- Having an emotional connection with their work (12) and being inspired, enthusiastic and excited about it (3,11,13)
- Having a bond with their organisation (12) and feeling proud of where they work (13)
- Describing "themselves to others in the context of their task" (3) (NHS National Workforce Projects Team, 2007 cited in West & Dawson, 2012, p. 7)
- Using spare moments to think about work challenges or problems (3)
- Bringing others together to be involved in their activities / common goals (3)

Conversely, disengaged employees display behaviour that resembles 'sleepwalking' through their day, with limited concern over clients, goals or challenges (11).

1.3 Three Pillars of Employee Engagement

There are certain conditions that facilitate people being able to bring their full selves into work. Kahn's model proposes three psychological factors/questions that determine the extent to which employees decide to personally engage with their work. These are "(1) How meaningful is it for me to bring myself into this performance? (2) How safe is it to do so? And (3) How available am I to do so?" (Kahn, 1990 p.703)(10). These factors are briefly outline as follows:

- Employees need to feel their **work is meaningful**: there are clear benefits from engaging with work, there is a return on the investment of self in the job. It is related to feeling valued and useful (10). Meaning can be sourced in different ways, it can come from a strong sense of connection to the organisation's purpose, exercising personal strengths at work, or having strong interpersonal relationships at work.
- Employees need to feel they are in a **safe environment**: there is no fear of negative consequences to their self-image, status or career when being themselves at work. For this to happen, social interactions need to be non-threatening, trusting, and have some consistency and predictability, so there is an understanding of boundaries and consequences for breaching these (7,10).
- Employees need to feel they have the **cognitive, emotional and physical ability to do their job**: having the necessary abilities and resources to do the job is key (10). This is not only related to job resources, but also to the notion of self-efficacy, employees trusting their ability to achieve work goals or tasks. When self-efficacy is high there is also willingness to take on tasks with increased difficulty (2).

It is of note that these three elements are all mentioned in reference to the expression of the self in one's role, not only the performance of the role itself, which points at the distinctiveness of engagement.

In a similar fashion, the Institute of Employment Studies (2009), in a review of engagement literature, noted employees feeling like they are contributing to something that is meaningful and worthwhile is crucial. So is feeling valued, encouraged, respected, listened and understood, as well as feeling "secure to be themselves (...) without fear of repercussion"(p.15)(4). All elements that share a commonality with Kahn's notion of meaningfulness, safety and availability.

These psychological needs are part of what organisations should be seeking to incorporate in their work environment and their organisational culture if wanting to enhance staff engagement (4,13).

2 Why Engagement Matters

2.1 Overview

Research has shown consistently that investing in employee engagement has benefits (4). It significantly contributes to organisational success, increasing performance (5) and supporting sustainable long-term growth (11). Indeed, employee engagement has been set to be a strategic priority for many organisations across a range of sectors (11,13,14), and as a key element leverage point to increase employee productivity (8,15). This is well illustrated by Gallup (2014) who states that “not-engaged employees offer perhaps the greatest untapped opportunity (...) to improve performance”(11).

Furthermore, the relevance of employee engagement may be accentuated in knowledge-based organisations. Zelles (2015) explains that in this work, which could define many Irish social service sectors, employees are the main asset, meaning that productivity levels rely on their performance, as opposed to, for example, production processes that can be improved through technological advancement (16). This is further explained by the sentiment that “when employees are producing an intellectual work product, their value as assets is greater than the actual labour that they provide”(p.66) (16). A sentiment that could easily be applied to the work of Irish Not for Profits, in which outcomes are frequently based on the relationship development between frontline workers and service users.

This section aims to describe common outcomes, both at the individual and organisational level, that have been associated with employee engagement and that are relevant for organisational success. It also briefly outlines reported levels of employee engagement with a focus on Europe.

It is important to note that the power of the effect of employee engagement in organisations is bi-directional: disengaged employees can **actively harm** the organisation performance, and engaged employees can **actively contribute** to its sustainable growth. These two way effect needs to be looked at in conjunction to understand the overall impact of engagement.

2.2 Disengaged Employees Behaviours Undermining Organisational Performance

When there is no engagement, employees are unhappy, focus on their unhappiness and act it out (11) by, for instance, undermining the work of their co-workers, or turning them against the organisation, including those who were already committed, taking over managers’ time, distrusting management and spreading this sense throughout by sharing their experiences, and pushing away clients (11,12). The risk of damage in organisations with high levels of disengagement is also heightened by the fact that disengaged employees are difficult to spot. Their undermining behaviour is not necessarily evident (i.e. not hostile or disruptive) and they can still deliver on their tasks (11). Indeed, Buchanan (2004) states that “observable performance factors are of little use in predicting an employee’s engagement level”² (para.4)(18). This suggests the damage, while having a serious impact on outcomes and work culture, can go overlooked for prolonged periods of time.

2.3 Engaged Employees Behaviours Leading to Organisational Success

In the same way disengaged employees act out their unhappiness, engaged employees who experience work positively, also project this in their attitudes, intentions and behaviours at work, which in the long run can translate into positive organisational outcomes. Importantly, high levels of engagement have intrinsic value for employees. It means work is experienced positively (4), and there is higher likelihood of increased job satisfaction (6), increased health and wellbeing, at least as perceived by employees (2-4), decreased likelihood to suffer from work-related stress (3) and increased self-efficacy(4). Key outcomes from an engaged workforce are described below:

- **Have high levels of job performance** is one of the organisational outcomes to be more consistently linked with engagement (2,4,5,19). This may be related to the fact that engaged employees make the most out of their abilities and talents, take initiative, engage in learning (4) and are more likely to invest their energy with clients (3). Research has indicated performance of engaged employees can be 20% better than the average (4), or at least be improved by 20% at the individual level (18), they are also more than twice as likely to be top performers or successful when compared to others, particularly the most disengaged (Watson Wyatt’s, 2007 cited in Robertson-Smith & Markwick, 2009)(4,11), and they have shown to have up to 87% reduced desire to ‘pull up sticks’ (18)

² This finding is stated in Buchanan(2004) based on the Corporate Leadership Council (CLC) study involving more than 50,000 employees in more than 59 organisations worldwide (18).

This link is also consistent across economic sectors. Hewitt Associates research (2015) illustrates this by referencing several examples from different industries where engagement has been found to be associated with significant changes in outcomes: in a wholesaler company, engaged sales employees exceeded the targets more than twice when compared to moderately engaged employees, in retail engaged employees had higher levels of customer satisfaction, and in manufacturing, engaged employees had 75% fewer quality defects (p.6)(20). There still remains a deficit of available information on staff engagement in the Not for Profit sector, a factor that the Insight Engagement project hopes to correct to some degree.

Engaged employees can also have a direct effect on managers work performance. Their positive and committed approach to work can increase managers' levels of self-efficacy, which in turn has been positively associated to job performance (4).

- **Undertake consistent discretionary efforts, go the extra mile and work actively towards improvement:**

In line with the above, engaged employees typically exert discretionary effort at their work (4, 5, 11, 17, 19). They are attuned with the organisational mission, vision and outcomes (17) and as such have perspective when working. The Institute of Employment Studies in the UK (2004) shows, for instance, engaged employees see the bigger picture, even when this comes at personal expense, keep themselves updated and look for opportunities to improve (19).

- **Display more organisational citizenship behaviours (OCB):**

Kataria et al., (2012) argues engaged employees are "more likely to be better in contextual performance in addition to the task performance" (p.106) (22). OCB accounts for a set of cooperative behaviours that are not mandatory in nature and, therefore, not necessarily rewarded or recognised by the organisation but that greatly contribute to its effective functioning (22).

There are OCBs of two types (6). OCBs directed at the individual, such as having prosocial behaviour at work (19) i.e. getting out of one's way to help others with work or non-work-related problems or tasks, accommodating own schedule to meet the needs of others in the organisation (6). The second category is OCBs directed at the organisation, getting involved in a proactive way in behaviours and activities that help the organisation in various ways. i.e. participating with ideas to improve the way in which organisation functions, sharing information, not complaining in relation to unimportant issues (22), protecting the organisation from potential problems, defending the organisation when it is criticized by colleagues (6).

Engagement has been found to be an important predictor of OCBs in employees (6), which in turn has been related to positive outcomes for organisations, for instance, it liberates time of management supporting more efficient allocation of resources, and enhances co-workers productivity (22).

- **Help the promotion of the brand of the organisation:**

Because engaged employees feel positively about the organisation (19), they are also likely to advocate for it both outside (i.e. with clients) and inside of the organisation (i.e. with co-workers) (3-5, 8). This can work as a protective factor against risks(5), and also contribute to attract highly prepared workers and retain already existing employees (4,5). Menguc, et al.,(2017) has indicated that engaged employees are four times more likely to recommend their organisations when compared to disengaged employees (14). The opposite is also true, with disengaged employees having behaviours that play against the employer image, for instance, by discouraging others to join the organisation, which is sometimes referred to as 'corporate terrorists'(4).

- **Drive innovation:**

Engaged employees are more likely to be creative and respond positively to the ideas of others (46). A survey conducted by Gallup Management Journal (GMJ), with approximately 1,000 US employees, found significant differences in the responses of engaged and disengaged employees to statements relating to the use of creativity at the workplace. When asked whether their current job brought out their most creative ideas, 59% of engaged employees strongly agreed compared to a 3% of the actively disengaged. Similarly when asked whether they fed off the creativity of their colleagues, 61% of engaged employees strongly agreed compared to 9% of the actively disengaged (46).

The Aon Hewitt Engagement Model is a useful framework to understand the outcomes of engagement at the employee level. This model depicts engaged employees as displaying three types of behaviours that benefit organisations: Engaged Employees Say, Stay and Strive (1)(20).

Figure 1: Aon Hewitt Engagement model



2.4 Employee Engagement Outcomes on Key Performance Indicators

There is also significant research indicating that organisations that have high levels of engagement has increased KPI attainment. The following list contains a summary of some of this research. It includes factors that Gallup's meta-analysis research across industries and countries has identified as having an established and confirmed connection with engagement:

- **Lower levels of employee turn-over and higher employee retention:**

Engaged employees have high degrees of attachment to their organisation and, therefore, decreased intention of turn-over (4,6,17,21). Gallup (2020) research on most and least engaged business units have found that the mostly engaged work units have from 18% to 48% lower turnover when compared to the most disengaged (48). These findings are further supported by the Corporate Leadership Council (2004) which in a study on engagement involving 50,000 employees from 59 organisations across 10 industries and 27 countries, reported most committed employees are 87% less likely to leave their organisation (47).

BlessingWhite (2008) also reported equally significant results, with 85% of engaged employees planning to stay in their organisation when compared to 27% of disengaged employees, and, importantly, a further 41% showing intention to stay if the organisation was struggling to survive (BlessingWhite, 2008 cited in Robertson-Smith & Markwick, 2009) (4). Furthermore, this organisational outcome has shown to be true for both high turn-over companies and low turn-over companies (25). Improved retention has also been observed in healthcare settings. In a study involving 10,000 employees across 16 hospitals in Ontario, it was found that as high as half of disengaged employees had the intention to start looking for a job in the near future compared to one out of ten of most engaged employees (13).

- **Higher levels of client/service user satisfaction**

The difference in end user satisfaction and loyalty between the most and the least engaged employees have been reported to be from 2 to 4% (25) up to 10% (48).

Some studies have also described similar results in healthcare settings (3,12,13), suggesting this finding also applies for the social service sector, where the interaction with the client takes a central place. High levels of engagement have been found to be significantly correlated with higher levels of patient satisfaction with level of care provided (12). So much so, increasing levels of employee satisfaction and retention has been used as a strategy to improve patient care service quality (13).

In a study involving 10,000 employees from healthcare settings in Ontario, a strong and positive correlation was found between engagement and three components of service provision: quality of patient care or services, patient centred care and patient safety culture. In patient centred care, for instance, 46% of highly engaged employees were in the top scores of patient centred care, compared to 21% of disengaged employees. Similarly happened when measuring patient safety culture, where 58% of highly engaged employees were in the top scoring compared to only 3% in the low scoring spectrum (13). This same study also points at an important aspect of the relationship between employee engagement and patient/client satisfaction, namely, its mutually supportive nature. Healthy workers deliver high quality patient care and delivering high quality patient care contributes to key workers physical and emotional health (13)(Eisenberg et al., 2001 cited in Lowe, 2012).

- **Increased productivity and decreased absenteeism:**

Gallup(2017) based on their global employee engagement data reports business units with the highest levels of engaged employees have 17% higher productivity and 21% higher profitability than those with the lowest levels (15). The cost of disengaged employees for national and regional economies is said to range from \$250-300 billion a year (i.e. Germany and USA) to \$4.6 - \$2.5 billion a year (i.e. Australia, Asia) (Merre, 2005 & Ratanjee, 2004, Rath & Clifton, 2004 cited in Shuck et al., 2001) (17). Moreover, it has been estimated that if the number of actively disengaged employees was to be decreased by 5% in the United States alone it could potentially increase productivity by \$79 billion (26).

This has been further confirmed by the Corporate Leadership Council who has stated that organisations have managed to increase their performance up to 20% through strategies aiming to enhance employee engagement, as opposed to availing from more traditional methods such as increased wages or benefits. This makes employee engagement "an essential defence against attrition for all companies worried about tightening labour markets." (CLC cited in Buchanan, 2004) (18).

The fact engaged employees have lower rates of absenteeism (17) than those who are disengaged, partly, accounts for the increased productivity. Engaged workforce rates of absenteeism have been found to be from 27% lower when compared to their peers(17), to 41% lower when compared to the most disengaged workforce (15). Gallup (2001) found, for instance, that actively disengaged employees report 3.5 more missed days per person per year and 0.55 more missed days for illness per person per year when compared to the average. In the United States, where there are 24.7 million actively disengaged workers, this represents in total 86.5 million more work days missed and 13.6 million more days for illness (26). In addition to this, research has also shown that engaged employees are less prone to presenteeism (feeling pressure to attend to work even when they are not fit to do so) (3).

- **Decreased safety incidents and patient safety incidents:**

Employee engagement has also been related to fewer employee safety incidents. Businesses with the highest levels of employee engagement, according to Gallup (2017) have 70% fewer safety incidents than those with the lowest level (15). Importantly it has also been related to increased patient safety (13,15), with best performers on employee engagement reporting 58% fewer patient safety incidents than those with the poorest performance, which has been related to engaged employees having high awareness of surroundings, safety procedures and being diligent when it came to clients or co-workers protection (15).

- **Increased organisational agility, ability to adapt to change and innovation:**

High employee engagement can improve the efficiency of organisations in their process of implementing large scale or organisational change. it can also (4) enhance organisational agility enabling timely reaction and adaptation to new or changing circumstances.

These organisational outcomes are also reinforced by the mutually supportive nature between engaged workforces and meaningful work environments. Once there are engaged employees, these are likely to contribute to creating work conditions that foster further engagement (Shuck and Wollard, 2009 cited in Dagher et al., 2015) (2). Efforts to increase staff engagement can therefore be the beginning of a virtuous circle in which engaged employees can contribute to a positive culture than further strengthens engagement.

2.5 Employee Engagement and the Social and Human Services / Not for Profit Sector

Research on organisational outcomes of employee engagement in the sector of social and human services is much more limited than that of for-profit businesses (12), indicating this is a field that has great potential for further development, especially in Ireland where no sector specific research was identified.

However, studies on employee engagement conducted in healthcare settings show very similar findings to those in other industries (i.e. lower staff absenteeism, lower turn-over etc.) (3). Importantly, employee engagement has also been associated with better patient outcomes (See Box 2).

NHS Employee Engagement Study Findings in Relation to Patient Outcomes (3) (West & Dawson, 2012).

Engagement was found to be associated with levels of patient mortality, reduced levels of absenteeism, and reduced staff turn-over levels in acute healthcare trusts. This study showed that if engagement was to be increased by one standard deviation (which represents an ordinary increase), there would be:

- Savings of approximately £150,000 on salary costs in an average acute trust due to decreased absenteeism
- 2.4% lower mortality rates
- 0.6% lower turn-over rate

Even though not directly linked to employee engagement, there has been some research related to job satisfaction and motivation of workers in the social service and public sector. The main findings show that in the non-for-profit sector workers tend to have high levels of satisfaction even when monetary retributions are lower or less satisfying than in other sectors (45). Furthermore, this job satisfaction has been found to be closely linked to intrinsic and relational incentives, those related to the social purpose and meaningfulness of the work as well as the quality of the relationships with co-workers, managers and service users (45). Based on these findings, Borzaga and Tortia (2006) suggest that **“satisfaction is likely to be the main organisational pattern through which nonprofits are able to increase their competitiveness and efficiency.”**(p.244) (45). Further adding that this evidence fully supports the design of policies to enhance non-profits ability to increase worker job satisfaction (45).

Similarly, Eldor (2018) in a comparative study of employee engagement with workers of the public and private sector, highlights public organisation workers may be driven to a greater extent by intrinsic motivations than employees from the private sector, meaning the alignment of employees' values with those of the organisation can take considerable importance for employee engagement in this sector (44). Eldor (2018) also indicates that the importance of employee engagement for the sector is in the very nature of their work which is related to 'serving citizens', an endeavour that goes beyond fulfilling job tasks and for which engagement and commitment are necessary conditions. Focusing on employee engagement in organisations of the public sector may “offer (...) a competitive advantage and may contribute to a better understanding of employee functioning in public service”(p.521)(44).

2.6 The Relationship between Trauma Informed Care and Engagement

For the increasing number of social services aiming towards implementing a Trauma Informed Care (TIC) approach, employee engagement is crucial. Engaged employees tend to have a better understanding and be more attuned to their clients' needs (Rights Management, 2006 cited in Robertson-Smith & Markwick, 2009) (4,15). If employee engagement is to be considered as the opposite state of burn-out (27) and poor engagement a cause of it (3), the importance of engaged staff in being able to deliver a TIC environment holds particular relevance. Social services and education sectors have been at the centre of research on burn-out because of the particular emotional challenges their work poses (27). Maslach et al. (2001) points out that there are emotional work related aspects in this sector that have been shown to exert an additional influence on burn-out levels different to other job stressors, namely, having to be emotionally empathic and having to suppress emotions at work (Zapf et al 2001 cited in Maslach et al., 2001, p.) (27). This shows the complex situation that human services face, with frontline workers' wellbeing being at the core of delivering high quality service, and yet exposed to additional risks posed by the particularities of the context it operates in. The recognition of this has been emphasised, for instance, in studies involving the public sector where the reduction of burn-out has been seen as a potential way of improving public bodies employees' quality of response to citizens (44).

Moreover, the interconnectedness of TIC practices and employee engagement is also evident in their common human and psychological approach, both focusing on creating a safe environment for the employee and the client as the foundation to achieve better outcomes.

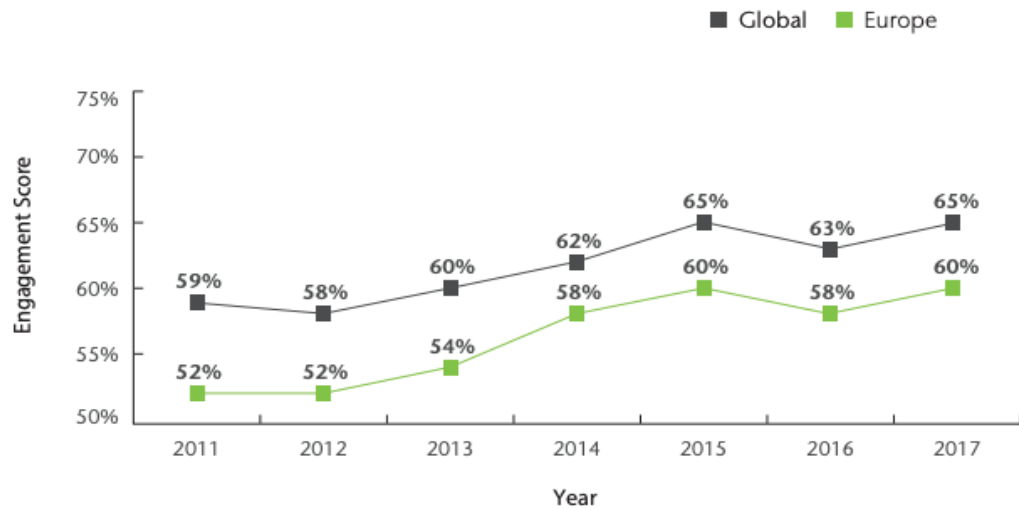
2.7 International and Regional Trends on Levels of Employee Engagement

Despite the consistent evidence on the positive impact of employee engagement, organisations keep struggling to create and maintain it. According to Gallup global's research (2017), 85% of the workforce is not engaged or is actively disengaged (15). Aon Hewitt consultancy (2018), on the other hand, reports considerably higher global levels of engagement but still shows 35% - 37% of not engaged workforce (14-15% employees being actively disengaged, 21-22% being passive, 38% to 39% being moderately engaged and 24-27% being highly engaged (p.7) (28).

Western Europe levels of engagement, however, are considered to be one of the lowest, worldwide. This is in spite of its high position in terms of economic development (15). Gallup (2017) reports that only 10% of employees are engaged in the region, lower than in America and Canada (31-32%) and Latin-American (27%), but higher than East Asia (6%)(15). Aon Hewitt has higher figures for Europe but shares a similar conclusion, that Europe is the lowest scoring region in the world (28). (See Figure 2). In the UK, the CIPD (2007) estimates engaged employees are over a third (5) with only 4 out of 10 being physically engaged

(being willing to go the extra-mile)(5)

Figure 2: Europe vs World: Employee Engagement



Reprinted from: Aon Hewitt Consulting (2018) 2018 Trends in Global Employee Engagement, p.11

These results have been shown to be bound up with levels of trust in leadership. Czarnowsky (2008) reports that as high as "85% of employees distrust their leaders' knowledge about how to develop employee engagement" (Czarnowsky cited in Dagher et al., 2015, p.248)(2), suggesting there may be general scepticism on it being a doable endeavour. Furthermore, a study on employee attitudes and engagement conducted in the UK by the CIPD (2007) showed that negative perceptions on leadership may be slightly greater in the public sector, where employees are less prone to trust their senior managers and think they have a clear vision for the organisation (5). The study also shows they are less likely to believe in organisational communication (5).

2.8 Conclusion

Research over the last few decades has shown substantial evidence of the relationship between high levels of employee engagement and positive organisational outcomes both related to organisations' performance, productivity and sustainable growth. These include lower levels of employee turn-over, absenteeism and presenteeism, as well as higher levels of productivity, employee retention and client/service user satisfaction. Importantly, employee engagement effect is twofold. Engaged employees can greatly contribute to the organisation's effective functioning while disengaged employees can harm it. Furthermore, this harm can go undetected for long periods of time, with employees having an acceptable job performance but adopting detrimental behaviours in the workplace that, in the long term, use up organisational resources and spread negativity to other employees, damaging the organisation's culture.

Engaged employees, in contrast, display an array of behaviours that, in direct and indirect ways, enhance organisations' performance and ability to thrive through difficult times as well as driving innovation. Engaged employees have high levels of job performance, are more likely to take initiative, make the most out of their talents, undertake discretionary efforts, keep themselves informed, seek to understand the organisations big picture to actively help to move it forward, use creativity and learn from mistakes, display organisational citizenship behaviours, advocate for the organisation and help the promotion of its brand. In other words, they do not limit themselves to do the essentials of their job but are also highly likely to push the organisation forward towards growth and protect it from risks, which is of particular importance in sectors where the human capital is the main asset.

For the human services sector, employee engagement is crucial. Two aspects explain its relevance. First, human services employees are exposed to additional risks, posed by the particularities of the context they operate in. This can lead to burn-out which, in turn, threatens their levels of employee engagement. Second, employee wellbeing is essential to ensure there is high quality service delivery, as it is staff members emotional and cognitive resources used in interaction with clients - the main component of the service delivery. Research on employee engagement in social services is yet to be properly developed, however, results in health care settings confirm findings, with higher employee engagement levels relating to higher patient satisfaction with level of care provided and higher patient safety.

The need for organisations to strengthen employee engagement is further emphasised when considering European levels of engagement have been reported to be one of the lowest worldwide despite the economic advancement of the region.

Organisations that commit to enhancing employee engagement can potentially benefit not only from the highly positive behaviours associated to engaged employees, as well as improved key performance indicators, but also from the virtuous cycle that is created once there is a positive working culture, whereby engaged employees are nurtured by a meaningful work environment, and a meaningful work environment is further strengthened by engaged employees working in a mutually supportive way. The literature paints the picture that an organisation is likely to be on an upward reinforcing trajectory or a downwards one, understanding levels of engagement can assist in ensuring this is the former.

3 Drivers of Engagement

3.1 Overview

Employee engagement is malleable (3) and can be created by structuring organisational systems and culture around human psychological needs (15) (i.e. safety, meaningfulness and availability). The CIPD (2007) states that employee engagement is about creating the work conditions that will 'realise employees' discretionary behaviour' rather than 'driving them to work harder', an approach that partly feeds on research showing that positive emotions can have double the impact on performance when compared to negative ones (p.3) (5).

The core question is how to make this happen. Which strategies, policies, components of the work environment can contribute to employees being able to fully engage with their work. These components are known in literature as drivers, predictors or antecedents of engagement. There is a wide variety of components. Some of these relate to job characteristics (i.e. organisation of work and job design) (3)(5), and some others to the level of support available (3) via organisational culture, work environment and interaction and communication with management (5).

Even though there is not a conclusive list of employee engagement drivers (5), there are some common factors that consistently show up both in academic and practitioner research as being key to foster engagement

The aim of this section is to outline these.

There are two important caveats that are worth noting when considering employee engagement components. First, employee engagement is not entirely dependent on conditions relating to the job characteristics, work environment or organisational culture. Levels of employee engagement can also be influenced by personal characteristics and personal resources (3), which are not only an influential factor on itself but can also play a mediating role between job resources (acting as engagement drivers) and levels of employee engagement (6)

In practical terms, this means that whether or not an intervention stimulates engagement in employees may be moderated by personal traits, and also that it is likely a minority of employees will be highly resistant to engage (5). Personal levels of self-efficacy, locus of control, hardiness, optimism, extraversion and resilience are examples of factors that can make an individual more likely to be highly engaged regardless of culture (3, 4, 6). Components of the work environment that influence engagement, however, can also stimulate personal resources (3) (i.e. Job characteristics or supportive work environment that help enhance levels of self-efficacy), showing the interactive nature of job and personal resources when it comes to improving engagement.

Second, engagement drivers can vary according to the specificities of the sector or the organisation (29). There is no secret recipe for success when improving employee engagement levels, nor there is a single approach that can be applied to all contexts (8). Employees' needs and concerns differ according to organisation or sector, and these specificities are to be considered when weighting the relevance of certain components over other ones. In other words, it is key to understand what drivers are more likely to create engagement and how they can do this within the organisation's particular context. In the non-profit sector, for instance, the importance of being aligned with the values and having a sense of connection with the organisation can weight considerably more than aspects relating to the job characteristics (21). This is important in that it points at the need of organisations to better understand the motivations of their workforce, the areas of engagement that most resonate with them and that are, therefore, more likely to have an impact if improved (28).

3.2 Supportive Relationships with Managers

The quality of the relationship between managers and employees is widely acknowledged in research as one of the fundamental pillars of engagement (1,3). This is because being a key driver itself, this component works also as a moderator for other key drivers (i.e. feeling safe, receiving positive feedback, having clear expectations, feeling involved and valued etc.)(8,19). Gallup (2017), for instance, states that:

"About 70% of the variance in engagement among workgroups can be attributed to their manager" (p.47) (15).

The relationship with management is also considered to be a decisive factor in employee wellbeing (30). Having a poor relationship with managers and supervisors is one of the most frequent cited reasons for employees' being unhappy at work (15) with lack of support from management found to be particularly associated with burn-out (6). On the contrary, employees perception of their managers as being benevolent (caring and protecting employees interest) is positively associated with engagement (7). Apart from managers recognising and valuing employees' contributions (11), providing clear guidance and advice (30), there are two main components of the manager-employee relationship that are central in supporting employee engagement:

1 Being supportive and promoting psychological safety

A positive relationship with management has shown to be one of the strongest influencing factors on employee psychological safety (7). Aspects mentioned in literature in relation to this are:

- **Creating trustworthiness** by behaving, as much as possible, in a consistent and predictable way (i.e. words and deeds match, behaviours do not change abruptly over time) (7,10,30). Kahn (1990) indicates that where employees do not trust on the "constancy of their task assignment or the control given them, [they may not choose to invest] themselves at work in any one direction" (10) (p.712). This is also related to ambivalence which sends mixed messages to employees (10). Developing trust is also a process that happens beyond interactions, extending to employees' observations of their managers' values and priorities (i.e. what they pay attention to, what they monitor, where they invest resources) (3).
- **Creating positive interpersonal interactions** underpinned by empathy, compassion, respect and consideration (11, 30). This is related to managers that encourage employees to voice concerns, show interest for their needs and feelings (7) and manage personal issues and conflict (30). A study conducted in Israel with public service employees, for instance, found that the "receipt of compassion from supervisors (...) in the public service workplace was positively associated with employees' sense of work engagement, and negatively related to work burn-out" (p.86) and as having an impact on employees "organisational citizenship behaviour (OCB) and knowledge sharing (...) as well as their service-oriented performance of compassionate behaviour toward clients" (p.86)(44)
- **Creating an environment that is open to failure** allowing employees to explore new ways of doing things (10)
- **Sharing control of work**, which can affect employee's perception of the extent to which their leader trust them (7,10)
- **Helping with difficult tasks or work-related problems** (7,13)

2 Coaching and supporting career progression

The coaching role requires managers to be proactive in supporting employees' career progression in a number of ways. The first one of which it's getting to know them as individuals, understanding their talents, strengths, goals and intrinsic motivations (11,15,23), and adopting, to a certain extent, an individualised approach (15). With this in mind, managers can then provide employees with as many opportunities as there are to exercise their strengths (11), assign them to teams or projects that enrich their experience, and arrange for career progression (i.e. be aware of potential career paths and look for training or experts that can play the role of mentors, when they cannot do it themselves)(8,30). Importantly, there is a need for managers to explain clearly available options for progression, skills required and possible pathways to achieve it (8).

Through coaching, managers may also be able to support employees' job-fit, which is a frequently mentioned driver of engagement (10,17). People are more likely to be engaged when the role description and demands match their interests, goals and idea of self they have created for themselves (10,17). Moreover, getting to know employees' in a more integral way can also provide highly valuable information to organisations about what drivers are most important for employees (8). In other words, managers' ability to listen and support is the vehicle through which an organisation can deepen the understanding of their workforce and find the most effective strategies to engage with it.

Other additional factors that have been mentioned as important drivers for employee engagement in relation to management are:

- Employees' belief that their **managers are committed** to the organisation (5). In healthcare settings, this commitment needs to be explicitly related to delivering high quality care (13).
- Managers' **ability to receive feedback and respond to it**, this means acting on it or providing a rationale when not possible. In any case, there needs to be a two-way communication where there is exchange of ideas and feedback coming from both sides (8), and where managers are actively seeking employees' input (11). This echoes with West and Dawson (2012), who in their study on employee engagement in healthcare settings, stated that "engagement is fostered where there are relatively flat hierarchies"(p.20)(3).
- Managers being able to **hold employees accountable** when they are not performing at the same quality standards as their co-workers (8). When such situations are not rectified on a timely manner it can cause feelings of resentment in fellow committed employees, and affect their levels of engagement (23).
- Managers having frequent and scheduled communication with employees (8).

Creating employee engagement is a highly challenging task. However, the potential of managers to successfully take on this role may be enhanced by the fact they themselves tend to have higher levels of employee engagement when compared to those who are not in managerial positions (12,13). Importantly, managers need to be supported on the task. Organisations may need to reconsider the very core understanding of their role. Baumruk (2006) points at the fact their work should be mainly concerned with the performance and development of their employees, and only concerned with outputs when delivered as a team (not individually)(8). The CIPD (2012) has developed a useful framework, worth note, that proposes the five competencies managers need to have in order to create and sustain employee engagement over time (See figure 3).

Figure 3: Five competencies of managers to support engagement

Table 1: Managing for sustainable engagement framework

Competency	Brief description
Open, fair and consistent	Managing with integrity and consistency, managing emotions/ personal issues and taking a positive approach in interpersonal interactions
Handling conflict and problems	Dealing with employee conflicts (including bullying and abuse) and using appropriate organisational resources
Knowledge, clarity and guidance	Clear communication, advice and guidance, demonstrating understanding of roles and responsible decision-making
Building and sustaining relationships	Personal interaction with employees involving empathy and consideration
Supporting development	Supporting and arranging employee career progression and development

Reprinted from: CIPD (n.d.) "Managing for Sustainable Employee Engagement Guide for Employers and Managers" p.3 (30)

3.3 Supportive Co-worker Relationships and Positive Teamwork

Supportive relationships at work are key factors in employee engagement (6). Similarly to positive relationships with managers, peer relationships can also foster psychological safety (7). The value of these relationships also lies in their potential to foster a sense of meaning at work. Kahn (1990) showed that people find work meaningful when task performance involves rewarding interpersonal interactions with co-workers and clients (p.707)(10), indicating that meaningfulness at work cannot only be boosted by enhancing the connection to the organisation's purpose, or by evidencing the difference one's contribution is making, but also through the creation of meaningful relationships in the work place. Positive and supportive interactions can provide employees' with dignity, a sense of worthwhileness, self-appreciation (10), sense of belonging, membership and social identity (7). Moreover, relationships of this nature may be of particular importance for those employees whose work does not involve facing clients.

Interactions need to be developed both at the professional and the personal level. Establishing a personal connection (31), being willing to know the other beyond its role, providing and receiving support (10) are considered important features of positive co-worker relationships that can contribute to engagement. These personal connections may make it easier for people to feel they can express themselves emotionally at work, which in turn can facilitate engagement (7). Research has suggested that putting in 'emotional effort' at work can lead to disengagement, this is defined as having to display the organisational desired emotions as opposed to one's real emotion (7).

The importance of having personal connections at work is further stated in Gallup's twelve core elements of engagement, one of which is employees having a friend at work. Even though, it has been considered a controversial indicator, it keeps consistently showing to be positively related to employee performance. In this regard, Gallup (2019) states that; "When employees have a deep sense of affiliation with their team members, they take positive actions that benefit the business - actions they may not otherwise even consider", further adding that even though "managers cannot manufacture friendships, (...) they can create situations for people to get to know each other and socialize without disrupting performance outcomes" (p.11)(49).

West and Dawson (2012), in their study on employee engagement in healthcare settings, noted that the level of structure of teams was related to the level of engagement of staff, with people in well-structured teams being the most engaged. Well-structured teams are defined as those that have "clear shared objectives, work interdependently and meet regularly to discuss team effectiveness" as well as options to improve (p.20)(3). Worth emphasising is that those working in pseudo-teams³ were less engaged

3 Pseudo-teams are defined in the study as those which did not comply with at least one of the conditions set to define well-structured teams (3)

than those not working in any team⁴(3), indicating that well-structured teamworking is important both in creating engagement and avoiding disengagement.

Relevant to engagement and related to workplace interactions is also the extent to which employees feel they have to adhere with co-worker norms. May et al. (2004) uses the concept 'concertive control' to refer to the formal and informal norms that drive attitudes and behaviours at the workplace (7). When these have low flexibility and there is high group cohesion, employees have to make a conscious effort to adapt to norms and may feel less safe, which in turn can affect levels of engagement (7). This suggests positive interactions with co-workers also depends on the flexibility of their behavioural formal and informal norms, which can leave more or less space for employees to 'bring themselves' into work.

3.4 Positive and Frequent Feedback

Providing positive feedback and recognition is vital to promote employee engagement (2,5,6,8,27) (28). It allows employees to feel both valued - feeling of being appreciated and recognised within the organisation, and useful - understanding the impact of their work, feeling it is making a difference, having a sense of accomplishment (10,23). Two factors that are directly related to people's ability to experience meaningfulness (10) and be engaged at work (3,5,19). Research has shown, for instance, that high organisational based self-esteem (OBSE), which is defined as employees perceiving "themselves as meaningful, valuable and worthy in their organisations", is positively correlated with work engagement (29). Positive feedback, similar to having a supportive relationship with managers, is a key driver itself that works as a moderator for other drivers.

This engagement driver may be of special significance for people in roles involving tasks that are not considered to be as central for the organisation, or that have no obvious external impact. Role status, which is defined by how essential the role activities are for the organisation, can affect the sense of meaningfulness at work particularly when these roles are overlooked or treated as unimportant (10). Positive feedback can help mitigate this risk.

There are three aspects that are important to consider in relation to the provision of positive feedback and employee engagement:

Frequency matters: the frequency with which feedback and appraisal is given is a relevant variable when seeking to enhance employee engagement(8,23). Gallup (2019), for instance, reports that employees who receive daily feedback are three times more likely to be engaged than those whose feedback is limited to an annual performance review or less (49). Similarly, they also have found that employees who have regular check ins with their managers "are more likely to believe they get paid fairly, more likely to stay with the company and more than twice as likely to recommend the company to others as a great place to work." (Gallup, 2019, p.11).

Structure matters: the level of structure in which feedback is provided can influence the impact it has over the employee. This may come in the form of personal development plans, formal periodic performance reviews (19), and appraisals that, first, highlight employee uniqueness and strengths, and, second, offer discussion relating to improving ways of working and/or professional progress. West and Dawson (2012) found that employees receiving a well-structured appraisal⁵ had significantly higher levels of engagement than those who had not, and that staff who received a poor-quality appraisal had lower levels of engagement than those who had not received any appraisal (p.16)(3). Indicating that feedback can be not only a leading factor in engagement but also a leading factor in disengagement when not done adequately (3).

It is built into the environment: also referred to as 'recognition-rich environments'⁶ this means recognition that comes from different sources (23) and at multiple times (23), and where there is a widespread use of ritual and rites to celebrate contributions, success and achievements (3).

3.5 Feelings of Control and Choice Over Work

Feelings of control and choice, sometimes also referred to as job autonomy, is a key driver of employee engagement (5,6,27,31). It was first observed in the Hawthorne Studies⁷ at the beginning of the 20th

4 Engagement was measured through three dimensions: psychological engagement, advocacy and involvement. This finding was true for all dimensions of engagement measured except involvement (3).

5 Well-structured appraisals are defined in the study as those that set clear objectives, are helpful in improving how the employee does the job, and leave the employee feeling valued by their employer (p.20) (3).

6 Term coined by Gallup in "What Is Employee Engagement and How Do You Improve It?" (23)

7 The Hawthorne studies were a series of experiments conducted in the 20's in the United States. In these experiments, engineers of an electric plant and researchers were interested in finding whether changing factors of the work environment could have an impact on employees' levels of productivity. The first change introduced was a variance in illumination. Increases in productivity were however noted both when the light was brighter or dimmer, soon making evident that productivity variation was related to the fact a change had been implemented rather than the nature of the change itself. Further experiments were conducted involving modifications in the job design and length of working hours. It was observed employees, both in the experimental and control groups, were experiencing a 'sense of pride' for being able to take part of the research and were benefitting from the special attention received from management, which in turn increased their motivation and productivity. This same studies also found that those employees that were being allowed a higher degree of autonomy or control over their job would show even further levels of motivation. The Hawthorne studies were decisive for the beginning of the human relations era of management theories (Gitman, et al. 2018)(32).

century, where it was noticed higher degrees of control over one's situation appear to lead to increased motivation in employees (32). This component has also been related to employees' feelings of safety at work (10).

In healthcare settings, the level of autonomy in the role has proved to be a very important engagement driver (3,29). In a study conducted with Finnish healthcare staff, for instance, it was found that job control, defined as control over timing and method, was one of the most significant predictors of work engagement (29). Indeed, this component may be of particular relevance in social services, where staff need to be comfortable with the type of services they are providing.

Feelings of control and choice is mainly related to being able to have a voice over what is done and how it is done (9), not having to constantly look for direction in others (10), having self-governance and ability to make choices over one's work (31). Managers play a decisive role in the extent of control that is exerted over employees. High levels of control can be partly triggered by highly anxious managers that are under pressure to deliver performance outputs and respond to job demands (9). This suggests, that to assure control levels are balanced, managers' needs should be part of the organisation considerations.

3.6 Involvement in Decision-Making Processes

Employee engagement is fostered when employees feel included in the organisation's decision-making process and feel able to make suggestions on ways to improve work (2,3,8,13,19). This driver plays an important role in making employees feel valued and involved in the organisation (19).

Findings of the CIPD (2007) research on employee attitudes⁸ found that 'having opportunities to feed your view upwards' and 'feeling well-informed about what is happening in the organisation' were two out of the three main drivers of employee engagement⁹ identified (p.2)(5). This finding indicates that employee's involvement in decision making is made of two key aspects: employees' having their voice heard and employees' being well-informed about what is happening.

Involving employees in decision-making requires more than sitting them at the table. It includes organisations having ways of ensuring they feel able to participate (19) (i.e. ensuring there is openness of communication between management and staff (3), and having ways of evidencing their voice is being heard and valued (19), for instance, by creating clear well managed feedback loops.

Similarly to feelings of control and choice, feeling involved in decision-making processes seems to have special relevance for social services. West and Dawson (2012) in their study on employee engagement in the NHS (UK), found that staff involvement in decision making, defined as the ability to exert influence in improving work and service delivery, was considered by practitioners as being part of the concept of engagement itself, which is build up in the NHS ethos as the importance of staff to be 'empowered to put forward ways to deliver better and safer services for patients and their families' (Department of Health 2009 cited in West and Dawson,2012)(3).

3.7 Sense of Connection with the Organisation and its Purpose

An influencing factor of employee engagement is also having a deep connection with the organisation and its values, mission, vision and purpose (1,2,11,33,34). This is described as a connection, bond or identification with the workplace that is experienced both at the emotional and social level, and that is at the heart of engaged employees displaying high levels of commitment, loyalty and interest to contribute towards the success of the organisation (17,33). Indeed, the Corporate Council Leadership¹⁰ (2004) reports that employees' emotional commitment (valuing, enjoying and believing in what they do) with work has been found to be four times more powerful in affecting performance than employees' rational commitment (pursuing professional, financial or other self-interest driven goals) (47).

Having a sense of connection with the organisation values is related to employees being able to associate their self-image or, desired self-image, with their role, as well as being more likely to invest or express their true selves in the workplace (21). This association, which is also referred to as work role fit (the extent to which the role fits their personal identity), has a significant impact on engagement (7). Additionally, employees' alignment with the organisation objectives is also related with them feeling they are making a difference and contributing to a higher purpose (4), also leading factors of employee engagement (3,23,31).

Moreover, employees connection with an organisation can extend beyond the identification with its purpose and include those aspects that make working for an organisation a unique experience. This uniqueness, also referred to as employee value proposition and cultural fit (28), is amongst the top five drivers of engagement in Aon Hewitt Global trends on Employee engagement (28).

Importantly, this component's influence on engagement can be particularly strong in certain sectors (i.e. non-profits) where employees prioritise value alignment with the organisation over other factors

⁸ Findings were based on a survey involving 2,000 employees in the UK in 2006.

⁹ The third main driver is: 'believing that your manager is committed to your organisation.' (5)

¹⁰ The CLC—www.corporateleadershipcouncil.com—is a division of the Corporate Executive Board, an executive network for leaders of the world's largest public and private organizations

(21). Kunle and Herman (2019) state that in the non-profit sector organisations are the vehicles through which people are seeking to realise their desire to make a difference, placing the identification with the organisational values at the centre of employee engagement (21).

Relevant aspects when promoting a sense of connection with the organisation and its purpose in relation to employee engagement are:

- Having clarity on the organisation's mission, purpose and vision for the future, clearly communicating these and ensuring it is reflected in employees experience, which implies going beyond providing only strategic direction (23,28)
- Ensuring the organisational values are being communicated in a consistent and clear way and in all respects (1)
- Helping employees to understand how their contribution fits in the overall mission (23)
- Creating spaces for employees to share stories and moments of accomplishment, and organisational achievement, connecting this to overall values (23)

Employees feeling their work has a purpose, is important or is making a difference makes them more likely to be engaged (3,4,31).

3.8 Perceiving the Organisation as Fair and Supportive

Employees perceiving their organisation as being fair and supportive can lead to higher levels of engagement (3,5,6,13,27). This is explained through the Social Exchange Theory, which starts from the premise that people have a strong need to reciprocate when receiving support or resources from another party. Applied to employee engagement, this theory conceives the relationship between employee and organisation as one of exchange, where if the organisation has a caring approach towards the employee and provides them with supports and resources, they will, in return, respond with higher levels of organisational engagement (6).

To understand the impact of these drivers, it is important to highlight the differentiation between job and organisational engagement. Even though this has just been recently developed, it has shown to have practical implications with, each type of engagement having different predictors and also leading to different outcomes. Saks (2006) shows that job engagement is predicted by aspects relating to job characteristics (i.e. job autonomy, job tasks variety etc.), whereas organisational engagement is predicted by the perceived organisational fairness and support (6). Importantly, in this same study organisational engagement showed to be a stronger predictor of positive organisational outcomes (i.e. intention to quit, job satisfaction, commitment etc.) when compared to job engagement (6). These findings suggest employees thinking of their organisation as benevolent and responsive has the ability to influence their engagement in ways that other drivers cannot.

- **Perceived Justice and Fairness:** employees' perceptions of justice and fairness can be affected by a number of factors. First there is the degree of consistency and predictability of the decision-making processes and outcomes (6), in other words, a more or less predictable organisational behaviour. Second, employees' judging as fair the decision processes and outcomes, as well as the organisation's ways of dealing with conflict (5,6). Third, the organisation fulfilling its promises and delivering on its commitments (5). These actions, apart from promoting a sense of fairness and justice, are also important to create trust (5).
- **Perceived Support:** organisational support means employees feel their organisation values them, cares about and promotes their wellbeing, and provides them with adequate resources and supports (6,13). In Saks (2006) study, perceived organisational support was the only predictor to have a significant impact on both job and organisational engagement (6).

3.9 Availability of Resources

The availability of job resources is a long-established driver of engagement (10,13,23,28). It is part of both Gallup's and Aon Hewitt's model, where it ranks amongst the top five engagement drivers in global trends (28).

Available resources is related to having access to adequate infrastructure, such as equipment, tools, technology and processes to be able to do one's job (28). It refers, however, both to tangible and intangible assets (23). Kahn's research points at the need of having physical, cognitive and emotional availability to be able to engage with work, further stating that unnecessary preoccupations and distractions in employees can affect how available they are to fully engage with the role performance (10). This indicates, available resources need to do as much as possible to alleviate or avoid these additional preoccupations, ensuring employees' resources are being used effectively.

Available job resources, apart from being instrumental, can also enhance employee motivation to achieve work goals, learn and pursue professional growth (35), as well as counteract the negative effect of high job demands in engagement (2,36). Even though, these findings apply for job resources in a general sense, where it includes other drivers (i.e. social support, positive feedback etc.) they do emphasize the relevance of ensuring employees feel they have what they need to perform their role. Importantly, where possible, organisations need to support employees to assist in defining the resources they need, by asking them as opposed to making assumptions (49).

3.10 Opportunities to Grow and Learn

Offering opportunities to learn and grow professionally can enhance employee engagement (5,28,31), lead employees to put more effort into work and do it more efficiently (23), and also increase employees' perception of availability and competence (7). Professional opportunities are not limited to offering training or new job positions; they also include encouraging employees to find better ways of doing their job, taking on challenging projects, triggering reflection on what they are learning (23), or involving them in the continuous improvement of the organisation service delivery and/or processes. Equally important is to have alternative career paths that allow employees to progress professionally and play meaningful roles outside of managerial positions (8).

3.11 Clear Expectations and Goals

Engaged employees are provided with clear expectations and goals (2,8,10,23). This requires not only communicating expectations and goals clearly but also helping employees to understand what this means and how this looks for the organisation. Gallup (2019) refers to this as discussing "explicit and implicit expectations for each employee...[painting] a picture of outstanding performance and ...(helping) employees recognise how their work leads to the success of their co-workers...and the entire organisation" (p.9)(49) Providing clear expectations and goals allows staff to have opportunity to succeed, reduces uncertainty and ambiguity, and can contribute to employee perception of meaningfulness of work (10).

3.12 Tasks and Skill Variety

A job that has both task and skill variety is likely to contribute to employee engagement (3-6). May et al. (2004) indicates that job design should be done in a way that does not deplete physical, cognitive and/or emotional resources avoiding employees from getting overload (7) (i.e. repetitive work with short cycles)(4). Also important are projects and tasks that keep a balance between routine and new skills (10). This allows employees to feel competent but also challenged and involved in learning and professional growth(10). Tasks should also reflect employees strengths, giving them plenty of opportunity to do what they are best at (23).

3.13 Conclusion

Employee engagement is malleable, it can be changed, which means it represents a highly promising opportunity for organisational development. The endeavour is, however, not straight forward. There is not a 'one size fits all' intervention that results automatically in improved overall levels of employee engagement. Instead, organisations need to increase the understanding of their workforce and learn about the particularities of their employees' needs and concerns.

There are, however, a number of well established factors in the working environment that, if in place, can help increase levels of employee engagement. Drivers of engagement are actionable, meaning organisations can develop strategies to enhance these aspects of the work environment. These vary from factors relating to job design and organisation to those relating to the quality of working relationships. Well established drivers of engagement are:

- Having supportive relationships with managers
- Having supportive co-worker relationships and positive teamwork
- Receiving positive and frequent feedback
- Having feelings of control and choice over one's work
- Being and feeling involved in decision-making processes relevant to one's work
- Having a sense of connection with the organisation and its purpose
- Perceiving the organisation as fair and supportive
- Having the necessary resources to do one's job
- Having opportunities to grow and learn
- Having clear expectations and goals
- Having a well-balanced tasks and skills variety at one's job

Increasingly, the evidence seems to point at the centrality of assertive leadership in employee engagement, with management reported to be responsible for up to 70% of its variance in workforces (15). This is potentially related to the fact it is through management that many of the other drivers are actualised (i.e. frequent and positive feedback). In any case, it indicates a pressing need for organisations to invest in preparing their management teams to provide supportive, effective leadership. This means managers are striving to understand employees as individuals, getting to know their talents, strengths and intrinsic motivations, showing concern for their interests and needs, and helping their career progression, while providing feedback and maintaining collective standards. This movement towards enhanced personal connection, or getting to know the 'individual beyond the role' can also be seen in the case of relationships with co-workers. Allowing space in the workplace for these meaningful relationships to take place may lead to employees feeling they can express themselves emotionally at work and, ultimately, be and give more of themselves to work, which is by definition what employee engagement is. Other important aspects of leadership include displaying consistent, congruent behaviours, being open to failure and helping with difficult tasks and work-related issues, aspects that can promote psychological safety.

Furthermore, drivers of employee engagement can reinforce one another in a cyclical fashion. West and Dawson (2012), for instance, point at evidence suggesting that “when resources are provided” employees are not only more likely to engage “but also more likely to be trusted by their supervisors and be given more opportunities for development” (p.12) (3) which in turn can foster engagement. In the same way, the enhancement of drivers of engagement can strengthen employees’ perception of organisational support which is, in its own right, a driver of engagement.

It is important to note that the above named drivers correspond solely to those belonging to the work environment. There are some other factors that have also been established as core to employee engagement organisations should be aware of such as work-life balance, flexibility in work schedule and length of work hours.

4 How Engagement Data can be Used to Improve Service Delivery

4.1 Overview

Implementing employee engagement surveys can make a difference on its own right if interpreted by employees as an effort of the organisation to improve resources and supports (6)(32). In other words, it can enhance the perceived organisational support, increasing employee's willingness to reciprocate this by being more engaged. The data gathered in these processes, however, should support also the identification of priority areas and actions that can improve organisational levels of engagement and, in turn, improve service delivery. There are number of ways identified within literature that can increase employee engagement, including:

4.2 Contribute to Organisational Strategic Planning:

- **Data provides a starting point to developing organisational-wide cultural strategies**(6), it can also measure **the effectiveness of initiatives** implemented (37). If over time, data is linked with other human resources and key performance indicators (i.e. turn-over, absenteeism, client satisfaction etc.), it can also be used to inform wider strategic planning (5,40).
- Data can also support the **identification of engagement focus areas**. Organisations can gain perspective on engagement drivers in most need of improvement (5,28), which can inform resource allocation for initiatives. Moreover, surveys can bring up issues before these escalate, allowing for early interventions (39).
- It can **show organisational strengths**, which are useful for branding and attracting new potential talent.
- Analysis of data at the work-unit level can also **support the development of specific targeted staff and team support strategies**.

4.3 Contribute to Enhance Understanding and Relationship with Employees:

- Data can help with **initiating conversations between frontline workers and management** and, because of surveys' anonymous nature, **raise employees concerns in a safe way, supporting identification of issues that may not have been known to the organisation otherwise**. In this sense it is also a way to **give voice to employees and make them feel heard** (38).
- **It can help organisations better understand their workforce**. Data can allow organisations to explore those aspects of engagement that matters the most and least for their employees. This is particularly important when considering the absence of a standard approach to improve employee engagement (8), and the differences between types and importance of engagement drivers among organisations(28).

Data can support internal and external benchmarking:

- **Benchmarking** within the sector (4) supports a better understanding of the position of one's organisation when seen in perspective with others in the same sector. At the aggregated level, data could also be useful to explore differences on drivers of engagement between sectors.
- **Facilitate the sharing of learning within and across organisations**: employee engagement data aggregated at the work unit level can help identify good practices in work units with high level of employee engagement and encourage the implementation of these across the organisation (25).

To reap the benefits of engagement data, however, it is necessary that organisations ensure, first, that the data collected is in fact actionable (11), meaning it focuses on factors that can be changed and influenced by strategic actions. To achieve this organisations need to have robust action planning processes in place (i.e. containing clear objectives and specific steps), and third, planning actions needs good input from employees (5,6) which is not only useful to increase commitment but also to better understand what actions are most likely to affect change. Implementing tangible actions that directly speak to the feedback received creates trust and confidence in the process (4,5), and is likely to itself have positive influences on engagement. Recognising employee engagement as a broad strategic issue involving all levels of the organisation, owned by management, and not left solely to the responsibility of HR departments is also crucial (5,23,39).

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