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## Employee engagement – what does it mean?

Have you filled in a staff survey recently that asks questions such as: how much do you enjoy your job on a scale of one to five? If so, the chances are that your management has become infected with the latest craze circulating human resources departments - employee engagement.

Engagement used to involve a diamond ring but since marriage has grown less fashionable we should not be surprised that acquisitive HR people should choose to use it as new packaging around a very old idea.

Companies used to be interested in loyal employees but that idea was lost in other management fashions for re-engineering, downsizing, outsourcing, offshoring or simply disappearing in a corporate acquisition, any of which could lead to an abrupt end to your long-term career prospects.

Besides, loyalty did not necessarily equate to being focused on your job, committed to your work, entranced with the corporate brand and product and generally besotted with every aspect of your working life. That is all about engagement, the trendiest, hippest word in human resources management's somewhat limited vocabulary.

Companies appear to be waking up, belatedly, to the possibility that their jobs might not seem the most exciting prospects for many potential applicants. The answer for many is to get employees involved in community programmes as part of corporate and social responsibility concerns, sort of killing two birds with one stone.

Another initiative, growing in popularity, is to educate the workforce about the product. Coors Brewing in the UK, for example, has "beer days", in which staff are led through the brewing process from start to finish.

It seems extraordinary that employers should need such familiarisation programmes. Yet, without them, you might spend all your career in a dusty administration department never getting close to either the customer or the product, and never understanding the business of the business.

In fact, I get the impression that some boardrooms are equally distant these days from the businesses that they buy and sell. Perhaps engagement surveys should be carried out among directors to discover how many have ventured to poke an inquisitive head around the door of the production departments of every business in their portfolio.

The engagement debate is raised in two recent pieces of research. The first is based on a survey of 1,158 people employed across the UK, carried out by Explorandum on behalf of CHA, a consultancy specialising in public relations and workplace communications. The second was carried out among 400 HR professionals responding to a survey on the website of Personnel Today in partnership with Chimento, the human resources consultancy.

The CHA report focused on workplace pride. It found that just over half of those questioned were proud of their job and just under half were proud of their employers. The rest were either neutral in their attitudes or, in a minority of cases, felt downright embarrassed about their job or their employer. Just under a half of those questioned

said they would recommend their employer to their friends. The findings indicated a "surprising degree of pride in work", but the results can hardly be interpreted as a ringing endorsement of the UK employment system.

The Chiumento report focused exclusively on engagement, "a fuzzy term which means different things to different organisations. Some measure it by looking at staff turnover, whereas for others its whether staff get a buzz out of working with their colleagues. Everybody's talking about it, but no-one is using the same language."

To be precise the report should have qualified the "everybody" claim. You don't hear people in finance departments muttering much about engagement.

Chiumento defines engagement as "a positive, two-way relationship between employees and their organisation. Both parties are aware of their own and the other's needs, and the way they support each other to fulfil these needs. Engaged employees and organisations will 'go the extra mile' for each other because they see the mutual benefits of investing in their relationship."

It could be argued that those companies choosing to abandon their workforces in favour of an offshoring arrangement have gone several thousand extra miles in order to make the change. Not much engagement there; more a case of disengagement followed by re-engagement.

Perhaps such observations led to the finding by Chiumento that little more than a third of the respondents believed that staff engagement was high in their organisation. Some of the highest ratings were found among smaller employers - those with fewer than 500 employees.

But the biggest problem surrounding the engagement phenomenon is that few employers have developed a sophisticated way of measuring it. Most appear to rely on measuring staff turnover and absenteeism rates, although employee opinion surveys are also growing in popularity. Chiumento has identified what it calls four pillars of engagement.

These involve employees understanding the aims of a business and their individual contribution, a desire to perform well in a job they consider interesting, a belief that the employer cares about employee needs, and, finally, a belief that people are supported.

This seems a straightforward uncomplicated list of employee concerns. But how many employers can say, hand on heart, that their jobs are fulfilling this criteria?

The real problem for employers is not that they do not understand the meaning of engagement but that too many of them fear its implications. This is because well trained employees occupying interesting jobs tend to demand healthy degrees of discretion and freedom in their work.

They expect to be invested with responsibilities for the way they perform their work and trusted to make educated decisions on behalf of the business within their sphere of expertise.

Some companies believe they can buy enthusiasm using US-style "attaboy" rewards dished out like gold stars in the classroom. We all like a pat on the back but we need to respect whoever is extending the congratulation. Real engagement is about the

belief among employees that their work is making a difference.

Significantly, perhaps, when both surveys asked people to list employers they admired most for engaging staff, the same names were listed on each occasion. The Chiumento respondents listed Asda, Microsoft and Virgin. The CHA report found that Virgin scored twice as highly as second-placed Amazon, followed by Tesco and Microsoft.

The most important factors in these appraisals had nothing to do with brand awareness but about the impression that these companies treat their staff and customers well. Treating people well should be fundamental to all areas of employment. It doesn't need a trendy description such as "engagement", just good manners and mutual respect.

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