

EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT: ORGANISATIONAL FLEXIBILITY



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Everyone knows someone who is not happy in their job. According to Gallup Inc. (a research-based global performance-management consultancy firm), 60% of Australian workers are not engaged, with a further 16% actively disengaged. This translates to there being 1.5 disengaged workers for every engaged worker in Australia. This has a huge ripple effect for the individual, as it flows into their relationships and mental wellbeing. For organisations, it translates to low productivity and this is not good news for our already sluggish economy. However, it does open up a fantastic opportunity for our profession to become part of the employee engagement discussion and contribute to the solution.

What does an engaged workforce look like?

Well firstly, they are outperforming their competitors by 28%. Don't confuse 'engaged workplaces' with the 'happy workplace': engaged individuals take pride and satisfaction in the work that they do, they feel valued and are committed in every way to an organisation's success. They have an 'owners mindset' where they have a vested interest in decisions. Engaged workers have an emotional attachment to the company and they willingly go the extra mile.

So how does your organisation measure up?

In world-class organisations, as many as 60% or more of workers are reported to be engaged. According to Business Review Australia, comparing Australia's number of 1.5:1 with leading employers like Google, who achieve a ratio of 9.57:1, and the benchmark 'ideal' engagement ratio of 8:1, it's

clear that Australia has much it can improve on.

What triggers disengagement and should I be concerned?

Some of the well documented factors often mirror the common worries we see in our clientele: job security, wrong job or work cultural fit, being time poor, work stress, poor work cultures and co-worker relationships, personal issues, and growing political and economic insecurity.

This is far from a soft issue: disengagement is costing Australian businesses close to \$33 billion annually. The healthcare consulting firm, Press Ganey, has demonstrated that engagement of nurses correlated more strongly to mortality than the nurse to patient ratios! You probably can recognise the signs of disengagement: absenteeism, low morale, low productivity and high employee turnover as well the clock-in, clock-out 'presenteeism.' High employee turnover is particularly concerning for organisations, with the average cost of replacing workers being close to \$20,000.

So what can organisations do to improve their engagement scores?

Strong career development programs are simply good business practice. Career development programs help employees connect with an organisation's vision and improve on their skills so that they can grow in their roles and perform to their potential. Supporting a culture of career development does not just improve engagement scores, it can also improve an organisation's brand, attract high calibre and motivated staff and improve retention of key staff,

productivity and customer experience.

Engagement initiatives do not have to be costly. Studies show, that after reaching the pay level of \$70,000 per year, the majority of Australians say that they would take benefits like flexible work hours, the ability to work remotely and a more positive company culture over a raise. According to Robert Walters, a recruitment agency, more than half of Australian professionals are considering moving jobs (56%), but only 28% will change jobs for an increased salary.

What does a career development program look like?

A career development program can involve:

- employees regularly engaging in career development discussions;
- timely and constructive feedback;
- recognising achievement;
- strong mentoring and training programs;
- accessible and frequent secondment or transfer opportunities;
- clearly visible career pathways;
- well defined skills (technical and non technical) required for high performance and transferability;
- valuing and encouraging sideways or diagonal career moves as a legitimate pathway to success, not just the traditional climb the ladder approach;
- enabling employees to use their strengths in their day-to-day jobs. According to Gallup Inc., 'employees who use their strengths everyday are 6 times more likely to be engaged on the job';
- encouraging self development and employee empowerment;
- hiring practices that account for learning potential, values and motivation. As Right Management, a

business management consulting firm advises, 'hiring the person who can do the job but doesn't want to is worse than hiring the person who may not tick all the boxes but intrinsically is motivated and has a willingness to learn.'

According to Right Management, 'one in five Australians are in the wrong job' and 'if the 20% of employees in the wrong role moved to a position they wanted to be in, organisations could increase their annual revenue by 0.7%.' Depending on the size of the organisation this increase can be huge. Right Management estimates for BHP Billiton, 'that's about half a billion dollars that they could generate in additional revenue.'

For us, as career practitioners, this opens up an enormous opportunity. Who else is better placed to help individuals understand their potential value? We can help

individuals build meaningful career, learning and development plans. We can provide support for performance management issues and decrease grievances from getting out of hand, as often the underlying reason is frustration in a lack of career progression, being disconnected from the vision, or wrong job fit.

We know that career conversations help individuals to identify what they really want, how to get there and how this aligns to opportunities within an organisation. Right Management found that 82% of employees stated that if career conversations were more regular they would be more engaged in the work they do and 75% of employees would be more likely to stay with their current employer.

There is a case for workplaces to have counsellors and coaches as part of their workforce career. In 2013, Google was cited by CNN Money as the number two company in the world to work for, and this was largely

based on their established career development culture which included offering 1:1 coaching to all Googlers. We are seeing a rise in Australia of organisations employing career practitioners who have job titles like 'Head of Career Development', for example at the National Australia Bank and Victoria University just to name a few.

Building a culture of engagement through training

A culture of career development has a commitment to growing employees at all levels – not just the management team. It's established wisdom that the most successful organisations are the ones that develop their people. Gail Jackson, the Vice President of Human

sense.

Engagement through meaningful work and flexible arrangements

Increasingly, especially among younger workers, workers want more than just a pay cheque. They want their work to have meaning and they want to feel passionate about what they do. Career practitioners are well placed to help individuals look beyond work and shift their focus to creating a 'good life' – a much more well-rounded and realistic approach to finding meaning. Simple work place activities like connecting workers to the vision and mission of a company, volunteering opportunities, and thoughtful corporate social responsibility initiatives can help

with this. Other initiatives have included making the workplace a 'home away from home'. The traditional notion of a job for life is fading; individuals are motivated by a career-for-me

mindset. Flexible work practices empower workers to choose how they spend their time and to achieve work-life balance. Just ask any returning to work parent after the birth of a child how 'indebted' they feel and the increased commitment they have towards a workplace that offers them flexibility.

Career counsellors can be key contributors to employee engagement solutions

Unfortunately employee engagement is still seen by many as a 'soft issue.' We have yet to truly partner and be seen as a trusted advisor amongst HR and Learning and Development professionals, our colleagues who are often tasked with engagement and career development. The statistics tell us there is still a lot of work to be done to improving employee engagement and I hope we as career practitioners take up the calling and become more part of the employee engagement conversation.

“...Career development programs help employees connect with an organisation's vision and improve on their skills...”

Resources for United Technologies (UTC), a multinational company, says, 'we want people who are intellectually curious... it is better to train and have them leave than not to train and have them stay.'

It's not just companies that can see the economic benefit of training. Singapore, through its Skills Future Initiative, provides learning vouchers (\$345 US) to any of its citizens over the age of 25 to spend on any 500 approved courses, including those offered by Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) in addition to universities.

For training to be most effective it requires a mix of both technical and people/leadership (non-technical) skills, and it needs to be offered flexibly with skills being transferable. Managers and leadership teams have the most direct impact on employee engagement so training them in people skills makes business