

Importance of employee engagement during the COVID 19 pandemic

Author: Tatenda Sayenda . March 2021

As we all know and have seen, the COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in widespread anxiety and a lot of dramatic workplace changes. Most businesses were forced to close shop and manage all their employees remotely. Many lessons have been brought about by this pandemic, one which is the importance of employee engagement especially when employees are working remotely and facing the challenges and horrors of the pandemic. Measuring employee sentiment and gathering feedback is more important than ever. According to SHRM, for companies to maintain a motivated, productive workforce, HR professionals need to find the best methods to gather and interpret employee feedback, including from remote workers and make changes.

What is Employee Engagement?

Employee Engagement is defined as a heightened emotional connection that an employee feels for his or her organisation that influences him or her to exert greater discretionary effort to his or her work. Employee engagement is rooted in how emotionally connected employees are with their organization and, in turn, how this connection translates into effective practices to work toward the organization's goals. Gallup defines engaged employees as those who are involved in, enthusiastic about and committed to their work and workplace. Job satisfaction, productivity and retention can all be affected by an employee's level of engagement. Harter, Schmidt, & Hayes, (2002), explained employee engagement as the individual's involvement, satisfaction, and enthusiasm for work.

Why is Employee Engagement important?

The importance of employee engagement cannot be overstated – employee engagement strategies have been proven to reduce staff turnover, improve productivity and efficiency, retain customers at a higher rate, and make more profits. Research by Gallup indicated that companies with highly engaged workplaces at the 99th percentile have four times the success rate compared with those at the first percentile. The same study also proved that companies with highly engaged employees are 21% more profitable and 20% more productive. An engaged employee always does care about their effort, work, and performance, and employees want to feel that their work, efforts, and performance could make a difference. Organizations that support employee engagement, intelligently manage talent, and communicate with employees honestly, accurately, and at the right time will ride the current market turbulence and be successful in the future (Robison, 2009). When employees feel that they are performing meaningful work, it improves their engagement and productivity. As a result, their performance soars and they propel their team to better levels of success and quality results (Harter et. al, 2020).

Key statistics about Employee Engagement

Below are some key facts regarding Employee engagement:

- A 2017 Gallup World Poll showed that only 15% of employees worldwide felt engaged at work.
- 2020 Gallup Panel survey found that 75% of millennials were engaged at work. Millennials and Generation Z are the future of our workforce, so this percentage is extremely encouraging. But these are not general results, they apply to U.S. millennials working remotely who have managers who keep them informed, care about their well-being and support them to feel well-prepared at work.
- "Employee Satisfaction and Corporate Performance in the UK," analyzed 35,231 employee ratings from Glassdoor, for 164 large UK companies between 2014 and 2017. The results reveal that firms rated higher by their current employees in terms of satisfaction achieve superior profitability compared to those rated lower.
- According to Imperative's research, purpose-oriented employees are 54% more likely to stay at a company for five-plus years and 30% more likely to be high performers.
- Research by Glassdoor reported that 53% of employees are confident that if they quit or lost their current job, they would be able to find a comparable position within six months. This trend indicates that if you don't give employees a compelling reason to stay, they'll find another job that does.
- In a May 2020 Gallup study in America, 38% of employees reported feeling engaged at work—the highest reported engagement level since 2000. But the number dropped to 31% in June 2020 due to COVID-19 case surges, George Floyd-related protests, unemployment spikes, and more. Employee engagement figures averaged 36% by the end of 2020, but an estimated 29% of remote employees reported struggling with loneliness.
- According to an October 2020 Gallup study, remote employees face a high risk of burnout.

How to keep Employee Engaged as they work remotely?

The following are recommendations of how organisations can keep the employee engaged during this pandemic and the new work experience of working remotely:

1. Take a 'supportive management approach

According to Deloitte, equally important for employee engagement is for an organisation to have a culture of recognition, to drive engagement. Research shows that high performing teams have a praise to criticism ratio of 5:1, meaning they give each other 5 times more positive feedback than criticism. Praising employees keeps them engaged; the feeling of being trusted releases oxytocin in the body, making people more energetic, creative and reliable, so praise your employees. Management should take time to check-in on their employees and give them the relevant support required during this time.

2. Create a positive work environment

Management must not forget the importance of constantly creating a positive work environment for their

employees. This must include making sure that work fits into their employees' lives and not the other way around. According to Deloitte, management must pay attention to factors that impact employees outside of work. When employees feel that their personal needs are valued by management, their emotional connection to the organisation is strengthened and they are more likely to stay on.

3. Encourage 'trust in leadership'

In an article by Deloitte, they highlight the importance of trust amongst leadership and employees, especially during this COVID 19 pandemic. During this pandemic, employees are trusting in their leaders to provide the right direction and make tough decisions for the future, especially on issues of how the organisation is tackling the issue of COVID 19 and how it will potentially affect the business now and in the future. To inspire this trust in leadership in the post-COVID-19 period, it is recommended that there be frequent check-ins and transparent conversations between directors, managers and employees so that employees feel included in what is happening within the organisation.

The Australian Psychological Society also makes the following recommendations on how organisations can keep employees engaged during the COVID 19 pandemic:

4. Show appreciation and acknowledge the effort

Recognising employee efforts and achievements has been shown to increase engagement, motivation and job performance. Acknowledging employees and showing appreciation, through simple gestures such as feedback and expressions of gratitude, results in many positive outcomes. According to APS, now is a good time to remind leaders and employees of the value of saying thanks, and letting employees know that their effort to persist with their jobs despite current adversities is appreciated and valued.

5. Encourage recovery time

Research shows that employees will experience higher levels of engagement when they commence the workday after a significant period of recovery. This means that employees start their day feeling energised and with the capacity to cope with the day-to-day challenges of their work. During a crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic, it is important to evaluate the typical employee's work situation and to encourage time away from work, ensuring sufficient recovery time. Employees working from home are likely to spend a lot more time in front of a computer. This, along with the stress and anxiety of recent changes, may make them more prone to exhaustion. Encouraging employees to take plenty of breaks throughout the day, to regularly step-out for fresh air and natural light, and to engage in activities to 'switch off' and transition from the workday to their life activities.

Jay Bregman, a serial entrepreneur and co-founder of the successful app, Hailo, tries to put employee well-being at the forefront of his agenda at his most recent start-up Thimble. They have Friday afternoons off every week and a stipend to spend on health and wellness initiatives. The payoff has been in employee productivity and 20% growth in headcount in 2020.

6. Enable teamwork and collaboration

Teamwork is a core driver of engagement. Being part of a group and working with others to achieve common goals increases our sense of belonging, purpose and meaning, positively impacting engagement and wellbeing. For teams working virtually, and even for those that are in a temporary standdown, connecting with colleagues is more challenging than usual. Make technology available to enable connection and encourage its use. Provide your staff with opportunities to talk to colleagues, develop personal relationships, discuss opinions, share ideas and collectively problem-solve.

7. Ensure work remains interesting, challenging and meaningful

Job design is an important consideration in maintaining engagement. Recent workplace changes, such as moving to remote work arrangements, may have resulted in unintended changes to jobs. For example, some employees may now have fewer tasks to complete, more mundane and less stimulating tasks, or may not find their work as meaningful due to diminished impact and less interpersonal interactions. This is important as research shows that task variety and task significance positively impact engagement. Consider seeking feedback from your employees on how they are feeling towards their work, and explore opportunities – where relevant – to build more meaningful work or projects that foster creativity or lateral thinking.

No matter what your business has been through (or is going through) amid a pandemic, engaged employees remain at the heart of every successful company. Employee engagement is not an HR issue but a business issue. Organizations should adopt innovative and creative employee engagement practices during this tough time of pandemic COVID-19 to keep employees motivated, stimulated, committed, satisfied, and blissful in this tough time.

Tatenda Sayenda-Havire is a Consultant at Industrial Psychology Consultants (Pvt) Ltd, a management and human resources consulting firm.

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