

A perfect match: decoding employee engagement – Part II: engaging jobs and individuals

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Abstract

Purpose – Part I of this paper addressed the environmental and leadership factors that contribute to employee engagement. Next, the purpose of this paper is to add the job and person to the engagement equation.

Design/methodology/approach – Summarizes the characteristics of engaging jobs. Then, reviews individual personality traits that engaged individuals are more likely to exhibit: hardiness, internal locus of control, active coping style, high self esteem, low neuroticism, and high extraversion. Finally, discusses the importance of a “match” between the employee’s preferences and the general work conditions and offers performance improvement implications.

Findings – Engagement is a complex topic and a challenging goal. An engagement-friendly culture values the diversity of talents employees bring to the table, respects individual needs, and inspires all employees to pursue a common and exciting vision of the future. Logically, engagement will not be impacted by a single training program, regardless of its quality. Enhancing engagement is a long-term proposition.

Originality/value – Individuals are unlikely to become engaged because someone told them they should. Engagement occurs naturally, when the conditions are right, when the leaders are inspiring, when individuals find the ideal place in which to apply their strengths. If this is true, performance improvement professionals might consider the following interventions: educate the leaders; focus on career development; champion work-life balance; encourage relationships.

Keywords Employee attitudes, Job satisfaction, Personality, Business environment

Paper type General review

Introduction

In Part I of this article (published in *Industrial and Commercial Training*, Vol. 40 No. 3, 2008), I addressed the environmental and leadership factors that contribute to employee engagement. Even though such factors have vital importance, however, one cannot reasonably ignore the importance of the job and the person. Arguably, some jobs are simply more meaningful, safe, and rewarding than others. Also, one can hardly expect people’s distinct experiences, interests, and personality traits not to result in unique reactions to environmental and leadership characteristics. In fact, two employees may work for the same leader in the same organization performing a very similar job – and yet they might exhibit different levels of engagement.

Next, I will add job and person to the engagement equation. First, I will summarize the characteristics of engaging jobs. Then, I will review individual personality traits that engaged individuals are more likely to exhibit: hardiness, internal locus of control, active coping style, high self esteem, low neuroticism, and high extraversion. Finally, I will discuss the importance of a “match” between the employee’s preferences and the general work conditions and offer performance improvement implications.

Job characteristics

I was very determined; I really wanted to see the results. I felt that I could help those people (the factory employees) to speak out and get what they needed (“Julia,” OD consultant and manager).

I feel engaged when (. . .) I can identify the impact of my actions to the organization and know that what I’m doing can be perceived as something valuable to the final client (“Lucy,” OD consultant and manager).

Both Julia and Lucy reported feeling engaged when their work was considered important. While Julia felt engaged because she could “help” other employees, Lucy wanted her actions to impact the organization as a whole. Julia and Lucy, therefore, wanted their work to be meaningful (Kahn, 1990). Previously, we discussed the connection between meaningfulness and a value-rich organizational environment. Meaningfulness also results from an employee’s perception that her work matters. Meaningful work is perceived both by the employee and by his coworkers as relevant to the goals of the organization.

Meaningful work is not only important – it is also challenging, requiring constant learning and progress. Challenging jobs increase feelings of accomplishment on completion (Kahn, 1990). Indeed, Kahn’s (1990) research suggested that individuals crave jobs that reasonably combine routine and novelty. For instance, Jenny, the manager of a large training division in Latin America, and George, a US American HR director reported:

I feel energized when I have new projects to work on, a new problem, something new to solve, a situation that is usually beyond anyone else’s capabilities to solve (“Jenny,” training manager).

I had spent much time doing a training analysis of supervisory skills (. . .) which resulted in developing a week-long training program (. . .). Prior to the first week of actual training (. . .), I definitely felt a great deal of apprehension about being able to successfully deliver the material, maintain the interest of the class, and successfully transfer the required knowledge. Amazingly, once the initial ice was broken on the first morning of training, it felt as if the rest of the week just flew by. The many different obstacles that I had created in my own mind never materialized . . .

I was never at a loss for words, never was stumped by questions (. . .), maintained the attention of the class, and almost never had to refer to the variety of notes I had created as back-up (. . .). It turned out to be a great experience (“George,” Director of HR).

Jenny and George’s examples exemplified a clear common “theme”: both involved challenging assignments that “stretched” their professional experience and expertise. Their experiences illustrate not only the importance of challenge but also the logic of Csikszentmihalyi’s (1990) “Flow” concept. A “Flow” situation demonstrates an optimum balance of a particular challenge and the resources needed to face it. Too little challenge could lead to boredom. Too much could backfire and cause burnout.

A last key engagement-related job characteristic is the level of control experienced by the employee. Maslach *et al.* (2001) suggested that employees need to sufficiently control their resources and their job in order to succeed. The connections between control, engagement, and burnout were further supported by studies conducted by Kahn (1990); Lindblom *et al.* (2006); and Koyuncu *et al.* (2006). Moreover, employees could need control to be successful and fulfill their professional expectations. A person’s inability to reach her expectations, on the other hand, could cause considerable stress (Kahn, 1990).

Lack of control, therefore, could result in stress and burnout. Even if low control jobs are stressful, however, individual stress tolerance levels vary greatly (Howard and Howard, 2001). The value attributed to the levels of meaningfulness, challenge, and control of a given

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job could, likewise, differ from person to person. Individual and personality characteristics of engagement-prone individuals will be addressed next.

Individual characteristics and personality

In “The search for the missing person” Gubman (2004, p. 42) argued that if engagement is “a heightened personal connection to the organization” research should focus on the person rather than on other factors. Is it possible for someone to remain engaged in spite of a negative environment, a particularly difficult job, or a poor boss? And if so . . . how can we find those “permanently engaged” people?

So far, most of the available research focused on the personal characteristics related to burnout rather than engagement. A few themes, however, seem to emerge from burnout research. Possibly, the person most likely to be engaged even under less than ideal circumstances is hardy, has an internal locus of control, and is able to actively cope with whatever problems come her way. In addition, personality traits could matter – individuals more likely to experience burnout are more anxious than average, and engaged individuals are more likely to be extraverted.

The first three traits – hardiness, locus of control, and coping style – were identified by Maslach *et al.* (2001). Hardiness means openness to change, the ability to survive when “the going gets tough,” resilience. Internal locus of control means that the individual is more likely to attribute events and achievements to her own abilities and efforts rather than to external events. Finally, individuals more likely to remain engaged have an active rather than passive coping style. They seem more assertive, expressing their needs more clearly.

Self-esteem is another trait that positively impacts engagement. Indeed, Janssen *et al.* (1999) found that individuals with high self-esteem were less likely to become emotionally drained and exhausted. Possibly self-esteem allowed individuals to see situations more positively. Janssen *et al.* (1999) admitted, however, that at this point it is still unclear whether self-esteem is a cause or simply a consequence of engagement. After all, engaged individuals are more productive and happy, and productivity and happiness could enhance their self-esteem. Further research is needed to properly establish the direction of the relationship between self-esteem and engagement.

Recently personality traits were connected to both burnout and engagement. Langelaan *et al.* (2006) found that burned out individuals were more likely to score high in “Neuroticism” (a correlated set of traits that includes pessimism, anxiety, worry, and other negative emotions). As a contrast, engaged individuals scored lower in neuroticism and higher in extraversion. In particular, the extraversion-engagement connection makes sense: after all, extraversion is connected with enthusiasm, outgoingness, and a feeling of “take charge” (Howard and Howard, 2001). Reasonably, “take charge” kinds of persons will attempt to change undesirable environments in order to suit their needs.

In search of the “perfect match”

A moment of disengagement for me came when I attempted to sell insurance. I am an introverted person and a person of great imagination. Both of these personal attributes are not important in an insurance sales position. For instance, many say that if one calls or sees enough people, one will make a sale. For a person with an introverted personality, the number of calls ones makes for a sale becomes a great burden. Trying to deal with a large number of people (. . .) resulted in a hatred for the phone and the doorbell. I had hoped to work in the marketing area of the company; however, I had no chance for promotion into the marketing department because my sales were not good enough. Where I could have become engaged in marketing, I could not become engaged in sales and ultimately left the company (“John,” OD consultant).

John’s story exemplifies a common organizational problem: promotions are based on the employee’s current performance, rather than on his/her future potential (Howard and Howard, 2001). This practice assumes that an employee’s behaviors in one particular area predict his/her behaviors in another. John’s inability to engage in sales would inevitably predict his failure to engage in marketing.

“Encourage employees to find a place within the organization where they can make the strongest contributions.”

There is, however, an intrinsic fallacy to this logic. Quite possibly, different environments engage different people. Rather than an absolute and inevitable condition firmly attached either to an employee's personality or to his general environment, engagement could simply be the result of a “perfect match” between the employee and all her work conditions. Concretely, the very introversion and originality that disengaged John, the salesman, could help him write brilliant marketing pieces in the solitude of his office.

Conceptualizing engagement as a “match” issue seems to make sense if we consider once again Csikszentmihalyi's (1990) “Flow” theory. Csikszentmihalyi explained that “Flow” experiences are highly enjoyable because they bring within them an acute sense of discovery, an increase in skills, and a “stretching” of one's capabilities. Of course, the question that bears answering is – would such “stretching” be of interest to everyone? Perhaps not. For instance, a study in the retail industry (Eisgenberger *et al.*, 2005) found that the high skill/challenge combination was more pleasurable to employees with high need for achievement. Others might prefer comfortable tasks and routine responsibilities. Simply put, anyone could be engaged or disengaged, in a state of “Flow” or in a state of acute stress.

This logic may not apply only to job-related challenges and opportunities. A given organizational environment or leadership style could represent a better “match” for some people than others. The same individual who would be happy and engaged in a free-spirited advertising agency might be miserable working in a bank. The key to success, therefore, might not lie in the search for Gubman's (2004, p. 42) elusive “missing person”. Instead, those of us in the performance improvement business should make it mission to constantly search for the missing link between like-minded individuals, leaders, and organizational cultures.

Performance improvement implications

In Part I of this article, I introduced engagement as a voluntary, spontaneous, and variable phenomenon. Individuals are unlikely to become engaged because someone told them they should. Engagement occurs naturally, when the conditions are right, when the leaders are inspiring, when individuals find the ideal place in which to apply their strengths. If this is true, performance improvement professionals might consider the following interventions:

(1) *Educate the leaders.* Leaders should understand:

- the importance of engagement,
- the personal and business benefits of engagement,
- their role as leaders inspiring engagement,
- leadership styles most likely to enhance engagement and most especially,
- the importance of matching employees to areas in which they are more likely to be happy, engaged, and successful.

In addition, leaders should understand environmental and personal conditions most likely to lead to burnout and disengagement. This understanding could help leaders create an environment more likely to engage all employees – including those who are anxious, non-resilient, non-assertive, and have poor self-esteem.

(2) *Focus on career development.* Help employees inventory their strengths and weaknesses. Personality and competency assessments could be particularly helpful. Regularly educate employees on various opportunities within the organization. Encourage employees to find a place within the organization where they can make

the strongest contributions. Actively promote job openings internally – and make applications easy and risk-free.

- (3) *Champion work-life balance*. Excessive workloads could prevent vital recovery processes (Sonnentag, 2003). Indeed, Sonnentag's research revealed that yearly vacations are too spaced out to help – employees need regular recovery time in order to re-energize and re-engage. Beware of workaholism. Include wellness programs in your curricula.
- (4) *Encourage relationships*. Promote formal and informal opportunities for employees to get to know one another on a personal basis. Consider offering regular team building processes. Champion a culture of celebration and camaraderie.

Above all, remember that engagement is a complex topic and a challenging goal. An engagement-friendly culture values the diversity of talents employees bring to the table, respects individual needs, and inspires all employees to pursue a common and exciting vision of the future. Logically, engagement will not be impacted by a single training program, regardless of its quality. Enhancing engagement is a long-term proposition.

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