

STAFF ENGAGEMENT

Is this a new fad?

Well, yes and no. Staff engagement or employee engagement is not an entirely new concept and debates continue over its precise nature. Nonetheless, as an area of both study and practice, it has been hugely instrumental in putting good people management practices firmly on organisations' agendas. It powerfully brings together a focus on employee satisfaction and well-being with a focus on performance to work for the good of the employee and the good of the organisation, in tandem – a win-win in organisational terms.

Leaders and managers across all functions and at all levels should pay attention to building staff engagement. The human resources department is the most natural function to lead on this area, using its 'employee advocacy' role to benefit organisational performance, but it should not be their remit alone.

Successfully fostering employee engagement requires working with all areas of the business. Employers should especially pay attention to:

- giving employees meaningful voice: facilitating upwards feedback, having respectful, adult-to-adult conversations and responding to employee views
- effective communications: that keep employees well informed and reinforce the organisation's purpose
- role modelling: employees need to see that managers are committed to the organisation and uphold the values of employee engagement in how they act
- fair and just management processes: for dealing with problems and supporting employee well-being.

So what is it exactly?

Employee engagement is a concept that has become increasingly mainstreamed into management thought over the last decade. It is generally seen as an internal state of being – both physical, mental and emotional – that brings together earlier concepts of work effort, organisational commitment, job satisfaction and 'flow' (or optimal experience). Typical phrases used in employee engagement writing include; discretionary effort, going the extra mile, feeling valued and passion for work.

In its work with the Kingston Engagement Consortium, the CIPD has defined employee engagement as "being positively present during the performance of

work by willingly contributing intellectual effort, experiencing positive emotions and meaningful connections to other”.

This definition gives three dimensions to employee engagement:

- **Intellectual engagement** – thinking hard about the job and how to do it better
- **Affective engagement** – feeling positively about doing a good job
- **Social engagement** – actively taking opportunities to discuss work-related improvements with others at work.

However, it is worth noting that numerous definitions of employee engagement exist, each with their different emphases. For example, one of the most enduring is that from the Utrecht University group of occupational psychologists. This sees engagement as having three elements, which overlap with the CIPD definition (above):

- **vigour** (energy, resilience and effort)
- **dedication** (for example, enthusiasm, inspiration and pride)
- **absorption** (concentration and being engrossed in one’s work).

Another element of employee engagement that is often considered essential is being aware of business context, or understanding the line of sight between one’s own job role and the purpose and objectives of the organisation. In many people management code of practice such as People in Aid and Investors in People this is a key indicator.

What are the benefits?

Employers want engaged employees because, as well as being happier, healthier and more fulfilled, **they deliver improved business performance**. Research has repeatedly demonstrated a relationship between how people are managed, employee attitudes and business performance. There are nuances in the drivers and outcomes of employee engagement, but this basic link holds true across different sectors and job roles. Positive relationships are evidenced with **profit, revenue growth, customer satisfaction, productivity, innovation, staff retention, efficiency and health and safety performance**.

You can find more information and a good summary of the performance link with employee engagement has been published by the government-sponsored [Engage for Success](#) movement.

Organisations also increasingly recognise the importance of their brand and reputation. Engaged employees will be stronger advocates of their organisations and help protect the employer from the reputational risks associated with poor service levels or product quality.

Conversely, having a disengaged workforce brings huge risks. As well as productivity losses, organisations may lose their best people and face huge difficulties when embedding organisational change if employees are not on board. Disengagement also threatens effective collaboration, innovation and human capital management, as employees will not be inclined to use their tacit knowledge and skills for the good of the organisation.