

## FOCUSING ENGAGEMENT ON DRIVING PERFORMANCE

**A**lthough engagement surveys deliver comprehensive information about a variety of employee attitudes, perhaps the most important attitude of all is absent from these instruments: how engaged employees are in reaching and exceeding performance goals.

Measuring the engagement of employees in pushing the envelope of corporate performance might be the most important kind of engagement organizations can foster, especially in this hyper-competitive post-recession world. In the current business environment, organizations need employees who yearn to succeed no matter the constraints placed on them by economy, budgets or organizational adaptations and changes. Companies need workforces committed to achieving personal, team and organization-level strategic goals.

What do engagement surveys actually measure? If you take a close look, you will find the answer is a gumbo of various job attitudes. For example, they ask about the job satisfaction, commitment and mental/emotional well-being of employees. They ask how involved people feel in their work, how much support they receive and how empowered they are to make decisions. Satisfaction with various aspects of the job makes up the lion's share of many engagement survey questions – for example, satisfaction with senior leadership, communication, rewards and recognition, work processes, culture and the firm's strategy/mission.

Traditional measures of engagement may no longer even make sense given recent changes to the workforce, as more transactional relationships are developing between employers and employees. Organizations are looking to cut costs and increase flexibility by hiring more temporary or contract workers. In a recent survey by *The Economist Intelligence Unit*, 67 per cent of 479 senior executives agreed with the statement “we must maintain a leaner organization, hiring on contract or outsourcing work rather than hiring full-time staff over the next 10 years.” Does it make sense to ask contingent employees if they “have a best friend at work,” or whether “someone at work cares about [them] as a person” as one engagement survey does? It might be more appropriate to

assess the engagement of this type of workforce by asking them “how committed are you to executing strategic initiative XYZ?”

The increasing number of virtual workers also has implications for measurement of engagement. Full-time employees are more likely than ever to work at home part of the time, or in mobile offices under conditions of great autonomy. Some of this trend reflects employees' desire for greater flexibility in working arrangements, to meet the demands of modern single-parent or dual-income families. As a result, organizations seem to care less about whether employees are in the office than with ensuring productivity. Measuring engagement in a focused, performance-centric way may resonate with modern organizations more than generic engagement surveys that ask about the social/emotional climate of more traditional workplaces.

How can organizations develop useful measures of performance-focused engagement? First, make the decision to create and nurture a high-performance culture, and then support key HR leaders in the creation of engagement metrics. If your organization is not the kind that yearns to be best in its field, perhaps this approach to measuring engagement is not for you. Second, develop survey items by considering specific kinds of performance your workforce should be engaged in. What are the key performance indicators (KPIs) that assess how well your organization is functioning? What objectives should employees focus most on, based on your strategic plan? If these can be identified, you can create engagement items that are tailored to these KPIs. Third, pilot test and evaluate your new engagement survey under the guidance of a technical expert, such as an industrial/organizational psychologist.

Traditional engagement surveys have a role in measuring a broad range of employee attitudes and guiding decisions about interventions to improve the work culture. But if you seek a high-performance culture and you want an index of how much motivation, drive and passion your workforce has to push toward and reach its goals, consider measuring how engaged your workforce is in driving performance. **HR**

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