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Employment relations and employee engagement

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Introduction

This free course, *Employment relations and employee engagement*, explores an important topical concept in Human Resource Management, namely 'employee engagement'.

Human resource management is premised on the idea that organisational success stems from the ability to extract a greater degree of willing employee commitment to corporate objectives, rather than merely competing on price or product quality. The implication is that what matters is the way in which employees choose to undertake their jobs and, crucially, the extent of 'discretionary effort' they are prepared to expend (Rees, Alfes, and Gatenby, 2013). Against this backdrop, raising levels of employee engagement is the latest in a long line of managerial strategies aimed at releasing employee discretion and aligning employee interests more closely with managerial goals, predicated on the assumption that this will in turn boost organisational performance.

Employees who are more engaged with their work are thus viewed to be more likely to behave in positive and cooperative ways, to the benefit of both the firm and themselves (CIPD, 2014a). It is also argued that engaged employees outperform others by showing heightened interest in their work and being prepared to 'go the extra mile' for their organisation (CIPD, 2014a). The claim has also been made that engaged employees see their work as more meaningful and fulfilling, and appear to experience increased job satisfaction (Truss et al. 2013). In this way it has been argued that there are potential individual and organisational benefits of employee engagement.

A problem arises however when we look at empirical evidence of engagement. Studies have shown that most employees are in fact not engaged at work – according to one study, it's fewer than 40% (CIPD, 2012). An employment relations perspective of employee engagement is thus somewhat more critical than the view expressed in the previous paragraph. Questions arise as to the following issues: Who benefits from employee engagement? To what extent is it possible to deal with external contextual constraints to achieve an engaged workforce (for example the state of the economy)? To what extent are the internal contextual constraints (such as poor management, lack of worker discretion, and low levels of employee voice) obstacles to engagement?

This course investigates various facets of employee engagement from a variety of different perspectives. The discussion opens with a critique of the concept itself, as well as the purported outcomes of employee engagement, including an exploration of both engagement and disengagement and the link between engagement and emotional labour. Employee engagement is then examined through the lens of its antecedents, including investigation of the concept of trust, the impacts of partnership and collaboration, as well as employee voice, communication and involvement. The impact of organisational change on employee engagement is also explored.

This OpenLearn course is an adapted extract from the Open University course B866 *Employment relations and employee engagement*.

Learning Outcomes

After studying this course, you should be able to:

- describe and critique the concept of employee engagement
- identify problems associated with both over-engagement and disengagement
- examine the extent to which emotional and aesthetic labour are positioned in some contemporary organisations
- critically evaluate the measurement of employee engagement
- identify the issues associated with employee engagement in times of organisational change, including the role of effective communications during organisational change.

1 What is employee engagement?

Employee engagement is defined as ‘a set of positive attitudes and behaviours enabling high job performance of a kind which is in tune with the organisation’s mission’. The three facets of engagement are:

- vigour – work-related energy and mental resilience
- dedication – being highly involved in work, feeling that work has significance, having pride in work
- absorption in the task – the extent to which employees are fully focused on their work.

1.1 A critical review of employee engagement

This course offers a critical review of employee engagement within the broader context of employment relations. This is particularly important given the attention and significance attributed to employee engagement in discussions of HRM and business success more broadly. For example in the UK, the MacLeod Commission Report (2009) has now become part of the Engage for Success movement. In the organisation’s own words:

> Engage for Success is a movement committed to the idea that there is a better way to work, a better way to enable personal growth, organisational growth and ultimately growth for Britain by releasing more of the capability and potential of people at work.

The MacLeod Commission involved government, academics and organisations working together to set an agenda for employment relations within UK firms. As Truss et al. (2014, p. 1) note, this is a potentially powerful coalition which can exert a strong influence within the UK regarding ‘best practice’ management and HRM.

The first stage of our critical review is an interrogation of the concept of ‘employee engagement’ itself. Given its prominence we might assume that engagement must be well understood. For example, ‘Engage for Success’ presents it as a ‘workplace approach’:

> …designed to ensure that employees are committed to their organisation’s goals and values, motivated to contribute to organisational success, and are able at the same time to enhance their own sense of well-being.

However, there is some dispute about the origins of the word ‘engagement’. Schaufeli (2014, p. 18) suggests the word originates in a Gallup poll of workplace environments from the 1990s, while Kahn’s (1990) article ‘The psychological conditions of personal engagement and disengagement at work’ is also often cited as an original source. Kahn’s (1990) work is premised on the notion that the individual has a ‘true self’ which they can manage and decide to involve or withhold during work-related activities:

> I defined personal engagement as the harnessing of organisation members’ selves to their work roles; in engagement, people employ and express themselves physically, cognitively, and emotionally during role performances. I

> defined personal disengagement as the uncoupling of selves from work roles; in disengagement, people withdraw and defend themselves physically, cognitively, or emotionally during role performances.
>
> (Kahn, 1990, p. 694)

This conception relies on a particular psychological conceptualisation of identity and on ascribing agency to the individual concerned. That is to say, it is the individual who decides whether they are going to engage with or disengage from their work. Both these assumptions have been challenged considerably in the academic literature (Truss et al., 2014) and prompted much debate in the field.

It has been argued for example that literature on the subject mostly presents engagement as a 'win-win' situation without acknowledging the impact on employees (Jenkins and Delbridge, 2013). Some researchers go further and have criticised the managerialist orientation within engagement literature for ignoring the 'dark side' of engagement for employees, that is, the negative impact for employees when management seek to increase discretionary effort to improve performance (George, 2011).

Another critique of the concept of engagement is that the influences of internal and external organisational contexts for engagement are largely underdeveloped. Specifically, it remains to be assessed how engagement initiatives relate to the current global economic and political climate of adversity and cost control (Truss et al., 2013). Against this backdrop, Thompson (2011) argues that management are faced with a series of 'disconnections' related to wider economy which means that they cannot always deliver positive benefits to employees. According to Kaufmann (2010, pp. 304-5):

> In the real world of competitive business the only metric of 'best practice' and 'high performance' that has long-run survival value is 'most profits'. The implication is that the notion of employee engagement is management-centric, underestimates potential conflicts of interest and may be methodologically fraught with mis-specification.

1.2 Antecedents to employee engagement

HRM policies and practices used to elicit employee engagement can be applied to the individual employee, to employees as a collective group or, as is sometimes argued, to both. A useful model here is the 'VOICE framework', outlined in Storey et al. (2009), as a means of addressing factors that might lead to appropriate employee engagement (see Figure 1). Click on the letters on the left-hand side of the image below to explore the different components of the VOICE framework.

Interactive content is not available in this format.

Figure 1 The VOICE framework

The CIPD (2014a) have identified three related aspects of engagement that are also helpful in thinking about policies and practices that need to be in place to ensure these are facilitated:

- 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.

The CIPD (2014a) further suggest that organisations need to pay attention to:

- effective communications that keep employees well informed and reinforce the organisation's purpose
- giving employees meaningful voice – facilitating upwards feedback, having respectful, adult-to-adult conversations and responding to employee views
- 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.

1.3 Employment relations and engagement: a collaborative approach

Different parties in the employment relations arena have held varying views on the quest for employee engagement. In some union quarters, engagement has been suspiciously regarded as yet another route towards job enlargement and work intensification. Other organisational actors have either dismissed engagement as yet another fad, or have not fully understood what it involves in terms of management competencies. The following quote highlights some of these issues

> What will turn employee engagement into another short lived fad is if it is used by employers as a method to get people to work harder. It has been reported that there is some hesitation in trade union quarters to the engagement agenda since the emphasis on discretionary behaviour can be seen as merely working harder or giving more effort, in unpaid overtime for example. And it is true that in some cases of poor implementation of high performance working there have been incidents of increased stress and the intensification of work. If some managers take the view that employee engagement is about getting employees to work harder, union reluctance will be well founded, but the overwhelming evidence is of mutual gains. There is also evidence that some managers think that employee engagement is just about listening to their employees via an engagement attitude survey as a form of two way communication. This will kill off the interest in employee engagement quickly as employees realise it is a sham form of communication. Employee engagement is about much more than this. It is about building trust, involvement, a sense of purpose and identity where employees' contribution to business success is seen as essential
>
> (Purcell, 2010)

Two aspects of the Purcell quote above are worth noting. First, it highlights the concepts of trust and voice in building an engaged workforce. These are important facets of engagement; their relationships with engagement are explored in more depth in later sections of this course.

Second, the focus in the Purcell quote above is largely on the impacts of engagement at the level of the individual, indeed, much of the literature on engagement focuses on the construct at the level of the individual. Research has suggested that both individual and collaborative engagement can lead to positive outcomes. Collaborative engagement is associated with partnerships between managers, unions and employees.

Evidence indicates that the benefits that can be gained from increasing 'employee engagement' can be counteracted if there is a hostile or poorly functioning relationship with the relevant union (Townsend , Wilkinson and Burgess, 2014). Other research by the CIPD (Gatenby, 2010) indicates that 'collective representation' and partnership with unions can be an effective driver for engagement.

Partnership between unions, management and employees can be seen as one route to collaborative mutual gains and engagement, although the goals must include the mutual gains and also the intermediate goals of improving the relationships (Townsend et al., 2014). A partnership requires a commitment from both parties to ensure institutional architecture is in place. Just as high performance HRM requires training and development to be in place, so too successful partnership requires space for the collaboration and partnership to take place. It needs to go beyond a formal document and live through the daily interactions between managers, employees and unions in the workplace.

Townsend et al. (2014) highlight two main prerequisites for collaborative engagement. The first involves the skills of line managers in collaborating and organising their line responsibilities, and the second is the nature of the relationships between managers and the union, when there is one present. Managers can work very hard at collaborating with employees, however, if there is a union present and the relationship is not a respectful, collaborative one, then employees are not as likely to respond as positively towards managerial initiatives. In short, collaboration or partnership with a union leads to much better outcomes for engagement than conflictual relationships with the union.

1.4 Engagement and disengagement

Existing literature and research makes a distinction made between engagement (regarded as a positive state for both self and work performance) and disengagement (regarded as a negative state). This binary construction does not seem to allow for a 'neutral' state for employees and encourages an either/or categorisation.

Engagement is defined by the extent to which people employ physical, cognitive and emotional degrees of themselves in their work. Engaged employees thus express their 'authentic' selves through physical involvement, cognitive awareness and emotional connections (Truss et al., 2013). Conversely, disengaged employees 'uncouple' themselves from their roles, suppressing personal involvement in physical, cognitive and emotional aspects of work.

Engaged workers are generally considered to be 'happy productive workers'. For example, it has been suggested that 'engaged employees often experience positive emotions, including happiness, joy, and enthusiasm; experience better health; create their own job and personal resources; and transfer their engagement to others' (Bakker and Demerouti, 2008, p. 215). From this perspective it is difficult to see engagement as anything other than good for both employees and organisations.

Although low levels of engagement, or disengagement, have been viewed within the literature as problematic: for individuals, in that they have been associated with impaired well-being, and for organisations, as they are linked with low levels of performance.

Another view is that high levels of engagement may be equally problematic; according to George (2011, p. 53), 'the costs of high work engagement for employees deserve far greater attention than they have received to date and question to what extent high engagement is always such a positive experience for employees'.

George goes on to argue that rising levels of productivity are associated with work intensification and income inequality, and questions the legitimacy of organisations deliberately soliciting high engagement levels but failing to reward workers appropriately. An additional problem is the probability of impaired work–life balance for engaged workers. Against this background, engagement may not always be uniformly beneficial to employees.

There is thus some concern over the overwhelmingly positive perspective on employee engagement and even its proponents increasingly acknowledge it might have a 'dark side'. In particular there is concern about the possibility of detrimental effects (for both individuals and organisations) of over-engagement (Bakker et al., 2011). **Over-engagement** can be defined as occurring when 'highly-engaged workers become exceedingly involved in their work activities' (Poulsen et al., 2014, p. 161), to the exclusion of other non-work activities. **Presenteeism**, the tendency to spend longer in the workplace than is necessary for the completion of work activity, has also been identified as a form of over-engagement (Griffiths and Karanika-Murray, 2012).

Over time, over-engagement has been linked to issues of **workaholism** (a psychological addiction to work resulting from extreme and prolonged over-engagement) and burnout (Griffiths and Karanika-Murray, 2012).

Some research has explored this relationship between employment engagement and burnout. In their review of the literature on burnout and the emergence of engagement, Maslach et al. (2001) describe how, up until the 1990s, work psychology had been predominantly concerned with negative states at work, like stress. They suggest that 'engagement' could be used as an alternative positive construction to 'burnout' (see Table 1).

Table 1: Comparing engagement and burnout

Positive − engagement	Negative − burnout
Energy	Exhaustion
Involvement	Cynicism
Efficacy	Ineffectiveness

(Based on Maslach et al., 2001)

This thinking was part of the turn to positive psychology and indicated an increased interest in employee well-being. This move was also reflected in the emergence of commitment rather than control approaches to HRM (Wall and Wood, 2005) and increased emphasis on mutual benefits for individuals and organisations from a 'happy productive worker'.

Despite such concerns, employee engagement has developed into a considerable industry in its own right (Welbourne et al., 2011; Keenoy et al., 2014; Warren, 2009). In Activity 1 we explore a challenging view on the positive impact of engagement at work.

Activity 1

About 90 minutes

In order to reflect on the meaning of employee engagement, a good idea is to keep a personal diary (over 3−5 days, which can be consecutive or over a longer period if you prefer. You do not need to write much, perhaps 200−300 words per day, though of course you may write more if you wish. Simply take 10−15 minutes at the end of each day to:

- Identify any feelings of engagement or burnout.
- Identify any patterns in when or why you felt more or less engaged.
- On reflection, how do you feel about the positive feelings of engagement that you noted in your diary?
- On reflection, how do you feel about the negative feelings of burnout that you noted in your diary?

Discussion

Warren (2009) usefully draws attention to the commercialisation of engagement within the broader framework of positive psychology at work. This is linked to notions of continuous improvement and self-advancement at both organisational and individual levels. She warns against assuming that 'feeling good' is positive for the self and that 'feeling bad' is always a negative experience.

Your diary will be personal to you and include reflections that you might find useful to add to your personal development record. You might also want to return to this as we continue to explore the concept of employee engagement and the challenges it provides for HRM practice in the following sections.

1.5 Emotional and aesthetic labour

Employee engagement requires employees to show engagement through extra effort, via the following dimensions:

- Emotional engagement – being highly involved emotionally with the work
- Cognitive engagement – concentrating hard on the work
- Physical engagement – being willing to 'go the extra mile' for the employer.

Hence employees are not just required to feel engaged, they are also expected to *show* they feel engaged. Engagement thus implies the use of 'emotional labour'.

Emotional labour 'involves the production of certain feelings in the worker, the production of feelings in others, and the effort, planning, and control required to express an organisation's desired emotions' (Eschenfelder, 2012, p. 175). Essentially this highlights that in many work contexts it is not sufficient for an employee to perform a particular task; rather the task must be performed in a certain way. In particular it is the **visible emotional performance** that is significant in generating organisational benefit; that is to say that profit comes from service with a smile. Although this is about appropriate and required emotional displays rather than simply smiling, consider for example the appropriate gravitas and solemnity required by funeral directors to perform their role effectively (Rafaeli and Sutton, 1987).

Figure 2 An air steward or stewardess needs to provide service with a smile.

Figure 3 An undertaker however should be much more reserved.

Moreover, it is not simply this outward display of emotion that matters but also the required 'internal emotional labour'. This 'labouring' describes how we cope and attempt to make sense of conflict between how we actually feel and the emotional displays we believe are required (Gabriel, 2008). While originally thought of as a key issue in face-to-face service contexts, this has since been shown to have a significant impact on employee well-being across a diverse range of contexts including call centres (Korczynski, 2003), within the voluntary sector (Eschenfelder, 2012) and also in the work of HRM professionals (O'Brien and Linehan, 2014).

O'Brien and Linehan (2014) suggest that emotional labour is embedded within the work of HRM practitioners as they must both emotionally manage others and themselves, particularly in difficult and challenging contexts such as those explored in this course. O'Brien and Linehan (2014) found that emotional labour in HRM work was related to four roles that HRM practitioners needed to play: cheerleader, champion, honest broker and rule enforcer, together with being professional (see Table 2).

Table 2: HRM roles and associated display expectations

Role	Expectation	Display requirement
Being professional	Maintains professional detachment	Suppress overly positive and negative emotion
	Displays a 'can-do' image	Display measured control
	'Face of the company'	Express positive emotion about self, work, and the organisation
		Suppress anxiety and negativity
Rule enforcer	Communicates, enforces, and models behavioural standards	Express social control emotions (e.g. disapproval, reprimand)
	'Guardian of the rules'	
Honest broker	Upholds moral/ethical climate	Display calm demeanour, impartiality, and objectivity
	Promotes fairness	
	'Conscience of the business'	
Champion	Provides support to employees and managers	Express empathy, interest, compassion
	Friendly and approachable	
	'Listening ear'	
Cheerleader	Responsible for emotional climate	Displays positivity, enthusiasm, job satisfaction, and pride in the company
	Engenders enthusiasm for work	
	Manages own and others' emotions	
	'Happy smiley people'	

(O'Brien and Linehan, 2014, p. 1268)

This research found that 'HRM professionals must enact an array of emotional fronts and abide by the emotional display rules of their job. At times, these rules are contradictory, and participants spoke of the challenge of managing conflicting emotion display requirements while trying to maintain an image of credibility and competence for different organisational audiences' (O'Brien and Linehan, 2014, p. 1277). Performances of trust,

integrity and fairness are highlighted as particularly demanding in certain employment relations processes (e.g. disciplinary proceedings) that HRM practitioners must deliver.

While in the case of the HRM practitioners studied above, there was seen to be a professional emphasis on certain displays, elsewhere organisations actively promote and encourage aspects of emotional labour, often incorporating this into expectations of employee engagement – see the case study in Box 1.

Box 1: Avatar Ireland case study

Cushen (2009) reviewed an organisation (given the pseudonym 'Avatar Ireland') in which a programme she calls 'Brand Essence' started as a marketing initiative, but developed into a description of employee behaviours and performance 'in order to deliver that "wow" customer experience' (p. 105).

Cushen goes on to explain: 'Employees completed Brand Essence workshops and were provided with reading materials and DVDs outlining how to behave and communicate in a way that was consistent with Brand Essence. Considerable emphasis was placed on "living the essence" and specific tips were provided relating to writing, talking and managing one's body language. There was no subtlety regarding the need to self-regulate in order to behave and communicate in a manner that was termed "on brand"' (p. 105).

However one of Cushen's interviewees used the geological analogy of 'permafrost' to describe how the programme affected only the surface layer of the organisation and of employee behaviour. She explains how employees 'were critical of such blatant normative control practices and irritated by the idea that the purveyors of Brand Essence believed they would be galvanised by it' (p. 110).

She goes on to describe the programme as an attempt 'to seduce employees into delivering extra functional, discretionary effort without offering anything in return' (p. 110).

This study highlights the risk of programmes which attempt to engender employee engagement and manage emotional labour. We will further explore these challenges later in this course, particularly when considering resistance to change.

The principles of emotional labour have been developed as researchers suggest other forms of labouring, including aesthetic labour. This is seen as particularly pertinent as the image of employees has become a part of the organisational branding. It is suggested that workers who were 'perceived to be "good looking" or simply having the "right look"' (Warhurst and Nickson, 2009, p. 386) are commodified or 'sold' as embodying the desired organisational image. Organisations pursuing aesthetic labour have, however, also found themselves subject to public critique, for example journalists and campaigners have raised the issue of whether the recruitment preferences for sales staff who look a particular way by the popular US clothing retailer Abercrombie & Fitch might be perceived as discrimination (Greenhouse, 2003; McBride, 2005; Williams and Connell, 2010). Explore these ideas further in Activity 2.

Activity 2

About 60

Abercrombie & Fitch, a well-known US clothing chain, now call their shop floor workers 'brand representatives' and previously called them 'models', rather than sales assistants.

(a) Search online for news articles reporting on issues raised by the recruitment of 'models' and 'brand representatives' to work on the shop floor at Abercrombie & Fitch. For example, the BBC covered this story on 13 August 2009 and 26 July 2013 and Canadian News covered the change of job title to 'brand representatives' on 27 April 2015.

(b) Explore the Abercrombie & Fitch recruitment webpages to identify the different job requirements of brand representatives and how this is presented to potential applicants.

(c) Then answer the following question: To what extent do you think this approach to recruitment is evidence of 'aesthetic labouring' at Abercrombie & Fitch?

Discussion

Much of the press coverage of Abercrombie & Fitch's policy regarding model recruitment has been negative, and finally it appears as though this has started to dent the brand's overall image and popularity in the youth clothing sector. Recent changes have seen a shift in both the marketing and positioning of store roles.

Nevertheless, the recruitment pages of the website replicate the same strong marketing aesthetic of the brand. Image, in terms of association with the brand and poise, feature in front of house role descriptions but are less present in back-room roles. The job requirements 'diversity awareness', which elsewhere on the website is defined as: 'about who you are as an individual – what's seen and unseen. It also includes the rich differences between individuals such as race, gender, family, sexual orientation, work experience, physical ability, and religion.'

However it appears that while this suggests a commitment to recruiting people from diverse backgrounds and different cultures, it does not rule out applying a judgement to ensure that they are all beautiful!

If you explored the 'work schedule' tab of the store opportunities you will see that the contract terms do not seem particularly attractive and might be labelled by some as 'zero-hours' contracts.

Having considered these issues of emotional and aesthetic labour it is not too much of a leap to suggest that employee engagement is somewhat more complex than it might first appear. The oft-promoted mutual benefit for employees and organisations might be rather more problematic than is claimed by movements such as 'Engage for Success' within the UK.

2 Can you measure employee engagement?

Guest (2014) is amongst those highlighting that many of the policies and practices that are said to help deliver employee engagement are difficult to distinguish from human resource management more broadly. This might lead us to question whether a focus on engagement offers anything new or different for HRM professionals. As already highlighted, there is a particular concern that employee engagement has become the commercial 'product' of consultancy firms; whose services often include the measurement

of engagement through annual organisational surveys (Arrowsmith and Parker 2013). We will explore this issue further in Activity 3.

Activity 3

About 60 minutes

We have highlighted concerns that employee engagement has become a 'product' of consultancy firms. A key tool used is the measurement of engagement through surveys.

(a) First, search the internet and find two or three examples of consultancy offerings in the area of employee engagement. Identify how engagement is defined and measured.

(b) Now answer the following questions:

- What are the potential issues with generalised engagement surveys?
- As a HRM manager, under what circumstances might you recommend using external consultants to measure employee engagement?

Discussion

These surveys can pose a number of issues in understanding and addressing 'levels' of engagement within an organisation:

- Survey results might reflect that a team or business area that is performing well might result in employees reporting higher levels of engagement (rather than the assumption that engagement causes performance improvements).
- The issue of 'how much' engagement is required to impact performance remains unresolved in both theoretical and practical terms. It seems unlikely that there is a linear relationship between engagement and performance and the point at which maximum performance returns are reported remains poorly understood.
- The issue of self-reported engagement within a survey response may differ from the extent to which an employee feels engaged on a daily basis at work (Sambrook et al., 2014). This might result from survey response biases or individual differences.
- Individual engagement may be insufficient to be effective in a team working context, and again the issue of 'how many' team members need to be simultaneously engaged to make a difference is not clear.
- Many other factors may need to be in place to ensure that an improvement in engagement might contribute towards an improvement in performance. As Sparrow suggests (2014, p. 102) 'an engaged but ill-equipped employee is a happy nuisance to many a customer. Or an engaged but still incompetent employee may be seen as well-intentioned but irrelevant'.

Using consultants is often an expensive undertaking but many consultancy firms consider survey offerings as a 'loss leader' and so they may be available at a low cost. If your organisation is new to this area then using a reputable existing survey can be more cost effective than developing your own. However it is important to consider that commercial offerings rarely acknowledge the 'darker' side of engagement and, as Guest highlights, the 'risk must be that it [employee engagement] will soon join the pantheon of laudable aspirations with which we can all agree, including happiness, quality, growth and sustainability; goals that most of us would like to pursue, concepts

that some people think we can measure but goals that remain ultimately elusive in many if not most cases' (Guest, 2014, p. 233).

3 Organisational climate and employee engagement

As discussed above, employee engagement is generally regarded as an individual psychological construct. However there is also a recognition that many of the influences on engagement (and related notions such as burnout) are contextual (Bakker et al., 2011). That is to say they relate to the nature of the job and other aspects of the work environment. Here we use an understanding of organisational climate to explore these issues in more detail.

3.1 The role of leaders

Certainly it seems that employee engagement should only ever be one consideration in the design of HRM policies and practices. However, many commentators seem to agree on the importance of leadership in providing an effective strategic narrative (Breevaart et al., 2014; Sparrow, 2014). Soane states that 'leaders play a pivotal role in creating the environment within which employees can engage with their work' and they 'make the difference between work as a mundane grind, devoid of meaning and purpose and work as an enriching and fulfilling experience that provides an essential source of identity which infuses all aspects of being' (Soane, 2014, p. 149). Looking in more detail, some research has suggested that different styles or approaches to leadership might facilitate different engagement outcomes. For example, Sarti (2014) finds that participative leadership styles are related to dedication and vigour dimensions of engagement and an authoritative leadership style is related to absorption and vigour. A participative leadership style is one in which leaders involve subordinates in decision-making and act to clarify and coordinate roles (Sarti, 2014), while in contrast, authoritative leaders tend to focus on routines and setting clear performance expectations for subordinates.

3.2 Climate and culture

Schneider et al. (2013, p. 362) defines organisational climate as:

> The shared perceptions of and the meaning attached to the policies, practices, and procedures employees experience and the behaviours they observe getting rewarded and that are supported and expected.

This is related to the more general conception of organisational culture which Schneider et al. (2013, p. 362) summarise as:

> The shared basic assumptions, values, and beliefs that characterise a setting and are taught to newcomers as the proper way to think and feel,

> communicated by the myths and stories people tell about how the organisation came to be the way it is as it solved problems associated with external adaptation and internal integration.

Schneider et al. (2013) observe that the key difference between culture and climate is the way in which academic researchers have sought to understand them. Questionnaire-based research dominates empirical studies of climate, while qualitative and case study approaches are more commonly used by culture researchers. Macey et al. (2009, p. 46) note that organisational culture is also seen to be important as it 'determines engagement at two levels:

> (a) that which creates and releases employee energy through the way they are treated as employees, and
> (b) that which channels that energy into competitive advantage through focusing on the strategy objectives of the firm.'

A further characteristic of research has been the examination of particular forms of climate which prioritise certain organisational outcomes. Examples include:

- safety climate (e.g. Dollard and Bakker, 2010; Clarke, 2010), which emphasises employees' perceptions of safety-related policies and values, particularly understandings of management attitudes to risk and commitment to safe practice
- ethical climate (e.g. Stewart et al., 2011) which emphasises employees' perceptions of the commitment to an ethical code that is effectively communicated and managed
- service climate (e.g. Hong et al., 2013) which emphasises employees' perceptions of the organisation's commitment to quality and understanding of how management rewards and improves quality-orientated behaviours.

3.3 Trust as a key aspect of climate

It is important, as with other discussions in the course related to voice, involvement and participation, that the individual employee is not regarded as passive, simply to be 'made' engaged.

It is suggested that trust has a critical role to play here: 'put simply, without trust engagement cannot exist' (Macey et al., 2009, p. 46). Cummings and Bromiley (1996) define trust in the following way:

> Trust (is) defined as an individual's belief or a common belief among a group of individuals that another individual or group a) makes good-faith efforts to behave in accordance with any commitments both explicit or implicit, b) is honest in whatever negotiations preceded such commitments, and c) does not take excessive advantage of another even when the opportunity is available. The rationale for this definition of trust rests on the socially embedded, subjective, and optimistic nature of most interactions within and between organisations that involve trust. Much of organisational interaction rests strongly on these three characteristics and thus makes trust so centrally important.
>
> (Cummings and Bromiley, 1996, pp. 303–5)

Trust can therefore be understood as a 'belief that another party will be fair, reliable and competent, and in consequence, the trustor becomes vulnerable to the trustee' (Alfes et al., 2012, p. 409). Both individual and group trust matter in organisations and are embedded within understandings of climate and culture. Organisational culture impacts the extent to which employees trust the organisation while climate impacts trust at group and team level.

Underpinning the value of trust is the importance of effective cooperation in organisational life. In the simplest of terms, trust is key because it enables cooperation (Tyler, 2003). While cooperation has always been important in organisations, emerging trends in organisational dynamics have pushed this to the foreground. Changes in the nature of work have made 'old' styles of securing cooperation more difficult to maintain. Additionally, the nature of cooperation has changed; there is now a greater emphasis on more 'voluntary forms of cooperation' which can be more difficult to achieve (Tyler, 2003, p. 557). Old style 'command and control' strategies for securing motivation are no longer considered sufficient against the backdrop of organisational changes.

Processes of globalisation, flexibilisation of labour relations, continuous change and the virtualisation of organisational forms, mean that the relations between people have become looser and behaviours are less easy to monitor. Within firms, hierarchical relationships are being replaced by lateral relationships (e.g. matrix structures and teamwork) further emphasising a growing need for voluntary cooperation, 'extra-role behaviours', or in other words, employee engagement (Bijlsma and Koopman, 2003, p. 543). Underpinning the heightened need for cooperation and engagement however, is the fundamental issue of trust.

What then is the relationship between trust and employee engagement? The following activity explores the role of trust in creating an engaged workforce.

Activity 4

About 60 minutes

In this activity we ask you to access the ACAS website and read the article Placing trust in employee engagement (ACAS, 2012). In the article, the relationship between trust and engagement is explored. The author of the article reviews relevant evidence and considers the role of trust in creating an engaged workforce. As you go through the article, make a note of how and why trust needs to be nurtured, developed and embedded within a variety of relationships. To achieve engagement, then answer the following questions:

(a) How is trust associated with the 'key enablers' of engagement?

(b) The author describes what high trust workplaces may 'look like', as well as how to create high trust workplaces in order to raise levels of engagement. Reflect on your own organisation (or one with which you are familiar). How well does your organisation match the description of a high trust workplace? What would need to be done in your organisation in order to match the description of a high trust workplace in this article?

Discussion

(a) In this reading the author uses the four key drivers of engagement (MacLeod and Clarke, 2009), those being leadership, line managers, employee voice and integrity. Each of these is argued to have strong associations with trust:

- Leadership – the author argues that leaders need to let go of command and control styles of leadership in favour of a relationship based on mutuality. Also vital for trust and engagement to be achieved is a need to develop a different style of leadership which is based on humility, personal integrity and humanity.
- Line managers – a key relationship that affects trust and engagement throughout the organisation is the one between the line manager and the employee. This is developed by a line manager demonstrating consistent day-to-day behaviours, used when giving feedback, setting goals and demonstrating concern for employee well-being, and by also showing they trust their employees.
- Employee voice – organisations that trust their employees to help develop and implement solutions report improvements in employee engagement.
- Integrity – integrity is considered essential to building an engaged workforce. The authors asserts there is a clear link between the behaviour of leaders and the stated values of the organisation; gap between these two suggests the values are hollow and this leads to a reduction in both trust and engagement.

(b) There is no feedback for this part of the question.

While discussing how notions of organisational climate and more broadly culture are implicated in the achievement of employee engagement, it is worth highlighting a common criticism, which is that research and investigation into the phenomenon of employee engagement has been predominantly conducted in European and American contexts (Truss et al., 2014). This issue will be explored in Activity 5.

4 Employee engagement in times of change

Historically, organisations were concerned with the maintenance of structures, systems and performance. However change has now become regarded as normal or indeed a desirable organisational state. Organisational change has been largely associated with downsizing and delayering as firms seek ways of cutting costs to improve financial performance. Taking labour out and extracting greater labour effort remains a focal point of restructuring activities (Thompson, 2011). As a consequence, dominant growth strategies for firms in many sectors prohibit continuity and employment stability. The impacts of organisational change on employee engagement is relatively under-researched, however it deserves consideration here.

In many sectors there is a fear of being left behind as organisations face the challenges of globalisation, technological advancement and economic turmoil. Both the pace and scale of change are increasingly creating a challenging context for organisations and their leaders, managers and employees. As a result ‘organisations are a cacophony of complementary and competing change attempts’ (Dutton et al., 2001, p. 716), so perhaps

it is not a surprise that some figures suggest that less than 30% of organisational change programmes achieve their stated objectives (Todnem By, 2005).

Change in the twenty-first century is complicated by the increasing connectivity within and between organisations, so that change in one area often results in a ripple effect. Indeed the relationship between organisations and their environment is never more pertinent than when considering issues of organisational change.

The range of change initiatives and drivers in contemporary organisations is increasingly complex, whereby the nature of work has undergone significant changes leading to a need to reconsider old command and control modes of management. Associated with such change, contemporary organisations are increasingly placing a greater emphasis on the voluntary forms of cooperation associated with employee engagement. The main changes within organisations are highlighted below:

- Changed work organisation – people are increasingly working in widely dispersed groups and in flexible work arrangements, including working from home, remote working, virtual working and working non-standard hours. This spatial and temporal dispersion of work renders traditional control and monitoring unviable, and implies the need for a new type of both interdependence and cooperation between workers and managers.
- Diversity – people are also working within a diverse workforce across different geographical locations both nationally and internationally. As with the point above, a dispersed workforce requires a new type of interdependence and cooperation between workers and managers. Moreover, the increased diversity within the workforce leads to the need for people to be able and willing to trust people with very different backgrounds.
- The design and content of work – rather than routinised and simple tasks, jobs are increasingly focused around a strong customer service orientation, as well as 'knowledge work' and intellectual labour. Each of these types of work depends heavily on high levels of engagement and voluntary cooperation in work.
- Structural change within organisations – hierarchies within organisations are increasingly being replaced by lateral alliances and social relations (Sheppard and Tuchinksy, 1996). Flatter hierarchical structures mean that people are working in teams, with responsibilities shared across group members, and within matrix structures with different managers for different tasks. Against this backdrop, formal controls and sanctions are minimal, and relationships between co-workers and management can be complex. It has been argued that employee engagement (and indeed trust) become paramount.

In the remainder of this section we consider different types of change before looking at the importance of communication.

4.1 Types of change

Broadly speaking, we can categorise types of organisational change according to four characteristics (Todnem By, 2005; Burnes, 2014):

1 The occurrence of the change, particularly distinguishing between discontinuous change and incremental change.

2 The way in which the change comes about, particularly the difference between top-down changes planned by senior leaders and emergent or bottom-up change (which might include those resulting from organisational development or quality improvement type approaches).

3 The scale of change especially differences between fine-tuning existing organisational processes, products or structures and transformational change in which these might be completely reconfigured.

4 Whether there is a specific 'content' focus of the change which might be organised around, for example, the need to relocate, introduce new technology, the merger with or acquisition of another company or expansion into new products or markets.

Activity 5

About 60 minutes

To what extent does your personal experience of organisational change resonate with the different types of change identified above?

There is no feedback for this activity.

Provide your answer...

4.2 Communication during times of change

Employee voice and communication is considered a vital feature of cultivating employee engagement. Employers need to ensure that they offer meaningful opportunities for engagement – communication between senior managers and frontline employees are important for giving employees a sense of voice. Opportunities for engagement need to be in the category of meaningful communication between leaders and employees, with opportunities to ask questions, raise concerns and offer suggestions (Dromey, 2014).

To be most effective in terms of 'voice' as an enabler, employers need to ensure that they engage employees in a genuine way which promotes dialogue and involvement rather than simply one-way communication. The increasing use of email as a means of communication with employees in this context is a concern as it offers very limited opportunities for genuine interaction (Dromey, 2014).

Employees who perceive themselves to have opportunities to effectively communicate their concerns to management are likely to elicit more positive attitudes and higher levels of performance. If employees perceive their work environment to be one in which they can share their opinions, ideas and concerns, they will in turn be more likely to demonstrate higher levels of engagement (Rees et al., 2013).

Communication and voice are an essential component of maintaining employee engagement in a change programme (Elving, 2005).

Conclusion

This free course, *Employment relations and employee engagement*, began with a critical consideration of employee engagement in the context of employment relations; exploring the broader issues raised by both positive and negative conceptions of experience at work. The concept of emotional labour was introduced as highlighting the complex challenges of these issues in practice.

The course then considered the role of HRM in delivering effective employee engagement practices and policies as part of organisational-level employment relations processes. This was further explored through the case study of the New Zealand post office. We also explored specifically the role of trust before moving to examine the perceived relevance of employee engagement in different cultural contexts as well as the ways to maintain engagement during times of organisational change.

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Further reading

Books

Hughes, M. (2010) *Managing Change: A Critical Perspective*, Wimbledon, CIPD Publishing.

Academic journal and other resources

The following special issues on employee engagement summarise key debates in the field:

EJWOP (2011) 'Special issue on engagement', in *The European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology*, vol. 1.

Truss, C., Shantz, A., Soane, E., Alfes, K. and Delbridge, R. (2013) 'Special issue on employee engagement', in *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, vol. 14, pp 2657–69.

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Tables

Table 2: O'Brien, E. & Linehan, C. (2014) 'A Balancing Act: Emotional Challenges in the HR Role'. *Journal of Management Studies*, 51,8. John Wiley and Sons Limited and Society for the Advancement of Management Studies.