

THE POWER OF STAFF ENGAGEMENT

Whitepaper 2019



Employee engagement is a powerful driver of business success. Data from companies across sectors and around the world show just how large an impact engagement makes, and what a competitive advantage it can provide.

Unfortunately, it appears that Australian workplaces are amongst the worst in the world when it comes to employee engagement. A Gallup report found only 14 per cent of employees in Australia and New Zealand are engaged in their jobs. An

overwhelming 71 per cent are not engaged and as many as 15 per cent are actively disengaged. The report ranks Australia seventh out of 11 global regions, trailing behind Sub-Saharan Africa and Eastern Europe¹.

The latest annual reports from companies in a range of sectors indicate that improving employee engagement in the workplace has become a top corporate objective, and with results like these, it is not surprising.

Technology is disengaging our workforce

Enlighten has spent thousands of hours observing operational areas within companies and despite a desire by leadership to engage employees, improvement remains elusive. From our observations, the reason is clear: some technology is disengaging our workforce, and in our technology heavy environment, it is increasingly difficult to foster and maintain engagement.

The digital revolution that brought the Internet and mobile devices has dramatically reduced the amount of face-to-face interaction that we have daily, a fact that has had far-reaching consequences in the workplace. The engagement initiatives many companies implement are delivering very little in the way of improvement because the technology factor is simultaneously pushing results in the other direction.

Before the digital revolution, social interaction was built into the daily management process. For example, a team manager would receive all the paperwork for his or her team at the start of the business day, and then delegate it to various team members based on schedules, workloads, and skills. Once the manager decided who would work on what, he or she would walk over to employees' desks and have a conversation with each one of them.

Later in the day the manager would typically touch base with team members and allocate additional work through this same process of conversation and check-in. Today's work environment in an 'always-on' digital world looks very different.

For example, we have observed employees report for work in large

operational areas without saying hello to a single person. Some with headsets on, looking at their phones, log in to their computers and go about their work - all of which is completed digitally. And as their work is given to them digitally, some team members barely touch base on a daily or even weekly basis with a manager.

Companies are often quick to implement new technologies to improve workflow and efficiency. Yet some technologies may carry greater costs than benefits. Many firms have introduced desktop monitoring software that follows employees' keystrokes and tracks how much time they spend on activities like browsing Facebook rather than performing work functions. When workers deviate from approved sites, they are told to stop. Intended to improve efficiency, this type of

technological intervention carries a steep cost by alienating employees and contributing to a larger sense of disaffection.

As Enlighten conducted assessments across workplaces, we also asked what makes people feel engaged. These were the types of answers we received: *"Somebody talked to me about how I'm doing."* *"Someone told me I'm doing a good job."* *"I've had an opportunity to learn a new skillset."*

When you consider these answers, it's clear that even basic human interaction is the key ingredient for fostering greater employee engagement. Increasing reliance on technology and removal of front-line management is the recipe for disaffection and rock-bottom engagement.

Improving engagement

So, what should executives do to deliver on the promise of employee engagement? The key to improving engagement is changing the habits and disciplines of frontline management. It may seem like a dated concept in a world of rapid technical advancement, but managers must talk to their people. In practical terms this means:

- **Hold** daily team huddles
- **Develop** individualised training plans for each team member, and regularly check in with team members about progress
- **Interact** on a daily basis with individual employees
- **Encourage** and foster intra-team interaction

These changes sharply increase the overall level of social interaction that happens in the workplace and over time they foster an engaged team.

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Metrics and disciplines

New management habits like daily huddles and regular check-ins are not enough on their own to improve engagement. They are part of a three-step process:

- 1. Measure** your current level of engagement with a standardised survey. This will give executives a strong sense of the organisation's current environment, and a baseline against which to measure progress.
- 2. Implement** a metric backbone that sets and tracks goals for team members. These metrics are the foundation for modernised, meaningful engagement.

- 3. Introduce** face-to-face management disciplines, such as having daily huddles, weekly planning sessions, detail informal discussions, and training plans for each individual, to increase total social interaction.

There are many organisations that have tried to use daily huddles and other similar practices to address declining engagement—but they tend not to maintain these new practices over time, and thus fail to make any sustainable improvements.

Conclusion

Digital technology is making employee engagement more difficult at companies across industries, and the associated costs are considerable.

But through the use of a simple process—which includes assessing the existing level of engagement, introducing a system of metrics, and training managers in face-to-face habits and disciplines—engagement can be substantially improved.

In a newly engaged workplace, managers interact daily with their team members, have regular huddles, discuss individualised training plans, and hold planning sessions in which the entire team participates. All of these interventions increase social interaction and, ultimately, workplace engagement, and they do so on a sustainable basis. As employees become increasingly engaged, the companies that employ them see valuable gains in overall performance.

References

¹<https://www.kochiesbusinessbuilders.com.au/gallup-report-finds-australian-employees-stressed-and-disengaged/>



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