

An Examination of Employee Engagement

Tom Hill

415/517-8704

thomas.hill@yahoo.com

Nearly a century ago, Edward Thorndike (1917) published his findings of a connection between work and satisfaction in the *Journal of Applied Psychology*. The precursor to Thorndike's research on job satisfaction was his studies of animal behavior, which led to the formulation of his Law of Effect (1911).

The Law of Effect states:

- 1) responses that are followed by satisfaction are strengthened; and
- 2) responses that are followed by discomfort are weakened.

Although Skinner (1961) bridged the Law of Effect's basic precept to human behavior via his work in operant conditioning, there has been a spate of research over the ensuing years evidencing a relationship between job satisfaction and job performance (e.g., Desantis, Glass & Newell, 1992; Emmert & Taher, 1992; Katz, 1978; Khojasteh, 1993; Nachmias, 1988; Romzek, 1989). The vast body of research links job satisfaction to both intrinsic and extrinsic influences — intrinsic factors such as task significance, skill utilization and social interaction; and extrinsic factors such as compensation, rewards and recognition. Furthermore, Herzberg (1968) and Maslow (1954) asserted that individuals develop positive job attitudes if their work is gratifying and allows them to fulfill their needs.

Since the theory of organizational role dynamics was introduced (Kahn, Wolfe, Quinn, Snoek & Rosenthal, 1964), extensive research has examined the relationship between a variety of correlates, including role ambiguity, role conflict, organizational commitment, job satisfaction and job performance.

A role is defined as a pattern of behaviors. Hence, role ambiguity refers to the expectations surrounding a role, and role conflict involves the incompatibility of demands facing an individual in that role (Ilgen & Hollenbeck, 1991). Research involving these constructs has been presented in three meta-analytic reviews (Abramis, 1994; Fisher & Gitelson, 1983; Jackson & Schuler, 1985). The general conclusion of these reviews has been that role ambiguity and role conflict tend to be associated with negatively valued states such as tension and low job satisfaction (Jackson & Schuler, 1985). The reviews also suggested a negative relationship between role ambiguity and job performance (Abramis, 1994), and role conflict and job performance (Jackson & Schuler, 1985).

It is hypothesized that the more role ambiguity an employee has, the less they will be satisfied on the job. It is important to understand that organizations are systems comprised of roles and work behavior guided by social interactions occurring throughout the role-system. Work roles provide constancy and stability to organizations. People may come and go, but organizations remain intact because of roles that guide expected behavior (Katz & Kahn, 1966). Because role-systems depend on the interaction of the members of those systems, role ambiguity and role conflict can be expected to negatively influence organizational outcomes. This is indicative of how the two role constructs of ambiguity and conflict are related to job performance. We can therefore ascertain that employees adversely affected by these role stressors will have poorer performance on the job and less job satisfaction.

A salient question would be: Why should organizations care about individuals' job satisfaction? The answer is quite simple — the aforementioned link between satisfaction and performance. There is considerable research illuminating a correlation between employees' well-being and business outcomes, as referenced by Ellis and Ashbrook (1989) in their research on the differential interactions of emotions and cognition. Their study of the implications of stress versus well-being examined how depressed mood states interact with memory and revealed the following: Depressed research participants, when compared to neutral participants, demonstrate poorer recall of difficult (high-effort) material and no loss in recall from low-effort materials. It is therefore implied that negative affect (such as depression) can filter cognition, particularly when complex cognition is needed, such as that necessary in most work

environments. Contrarily, positive emotions enhance information processing strategies (Fiedler, 1988; Schwarz & Bless, 1991) and broaden cognitive potential. Furthermore, positive affect influences creative thinking (Fredricksen, 1998; Isen, 1987; Ziv, 1976).

Fredricksen (1998) espoused a “broaden and build” model that describes how positive emotions “broaden people’s momentary thought action repertoires” and “build their enduring personal resources” (p. 300). In addition to broadening the scope of attention, cognition and action, positive emotions also build physical, intellectual and social resources. And while negative emotions lead to varying degrees of our primitive fight or flight response and a lessening of cognitive activity, the broadened scope of cognition that is the result of positive emotions, which lead to more enduring thoughts and actions relational to successful business outcomes.

Workplace attitudes with the most noteworthy relationship to business outcomes are emphasized by Fredricksen (1998) as joy (happiness, amusement, elation); interest (curiosity, intrigue, excitement or wonder); contentment (tranquility or serenity); and love (emotions felt toward specific individuals). Although contentment is more readily identified with the broad construct of job satisfaction, the other attitudes of joy, interest and love (or caring) are specifically observable in high-performing workplaces across industries and job types (Harter, Schmidt & Keyes, 2002). Therefore, occurrences that bring about joy, interest and love (or caring) are more apt to bond individuals to each other, their work and their organization. According to Kahn (1990), employees are more cognitively and emotionally engaged when their basic needs are met. The positive emotions resultant of higher frequencies of joy, interest and love (or caring) serve to broaden employees’ attention, cognition and action in areas related to the welfare of the business (Harter, Schmidt & Keyes, 2002).

Gallup organization research depicts the significant impact of employee attitudes on business outcomes. Their findings show that companies with above average employee job satisfaction also have 38 percent higher customer satisfaction scores, 22 percent higher productivity rates and 27percent higher profits. (Gallup.com)

The Difference between Employee Satisfaction and Employee Engagement

As previously noted, there is a plethora of credible research on the topic of job satisfaction and relevant hypothetical constructs that lead to it. The next phase of discourse on the topic — and the crux of this treatise — centers on the notion of a discernable difference between job satisfaction and employee engagement. Is it tautological to assert that a satisfied employee is an engaged employee? Not at all. An employee may be satisfied with the compensation, perquisites and other facets of his or her job, but this does not guarantee an exhibition of unwavering commitment to take the company's performance to a distinctly higher level of excellence. This is the domain of the engaged employee.

There are common occurrences of employees with low engagement and high satisfaction — for instance, when an employee is miscast in his or her role. The employee may appreciate the organization for placing him or her in a high-paying position, but the organization may fail to hold the employee accountable for being productive. Another example entails a scenario where an employee is proud of the organization for which he or she works (e.g., a venerable learning institution, a healthcare provider, or a charitable organization that provides for the greater good). The employee may enjoy the work, but he or she has a poor relationship with his or her supervisor and/or workgroup. The employee in this case may derive satisfaction from the work itself and pride of association with the organization, but engagement is lacking due to negative workplace relationships.

Then there are cases of high engagement and low satisfaction. One illustration would be the opposite of the foregoing account, when an employee is connected and committed to his or her supervisor and workgroup but lacks meaningful engagement with the organization. Although the employee is more willing to patiently await the organization's change, this type of situation likely evolves to an "us versus them" mentality. Employees may love their work, their coworkers and direct supervisors, and be good at their jobs; nevertheless, if they feel disconnected from the organization, they will be disinclined to exert their discretionary effort for the good of the overall enterprise. And over the course of time they may be

prone to cynicism — a consequence that is all the more detrimental when it emanates from otherwise engaged employees.

Research by the Gallup organization shows that both employee engagement and employee satisfaction relate to meaningful outcomes. However, satisfaction is primarily attitudinal — like organizational loyalty or pride — with certain aspects that are irrelevant to performance. Engagement, on the other hand, predicts satisfaction and other concrete business outcomes (Blizzard, 2003). In the publication, *Employee Engagement: Tools for Analysis, Practice, and Competitive Advantage* (2009), the authors claim a fundamental distinction between engagement and satisfaction is that engagement connotes energy and not satiation; while satisfaction connotes satiation and contentment but not energy. According to an HR Magazine cover story entitled, *Getting Engaged* (2004, February 1), engagement has little to do with how much an employee is paid and little to do with employee satisfaction; some employees are highly satisfied to be under minimal pressure to produce. Conversely, engagement has a lot to do with how an employee feels about the work experience and how he or she is treated. It has a lot to do with emotions. This is not to say that job satisfaction is unimportant. In addition to being engaged, truly happy employees will be satisfied with their salaries, benefits, schedules, and other items that do not directly relate to engagement.

Engagement is about how people think and, more importantly, how they feel. In fact, neuroscience and psychology coalesce to inform us that emotions triumph over reason. According to noted neuroscientist Antonio Damasio, emotions direct us to the sector of the decision-making space where our reason operates most efficiently. His discoveries led him to conclude that well-tuned and deployed emotion is necessary for our reasoning to operate properly (Lane & Nadel, 2000). It is therefore in the best interest of an organization to be attuned to and actively monitor the emotional climate of the workplace — not to mollify employees but in order to engage them.

Defining Employee Engagement

There does not appear to be agreement on a standardized definition of the term “employee engagement” in either psychological or business literature. In fact, its explication is as varied as those who tout the topic. In contemporaneous texts, employee engagement has been reported to belong on the continuums of stress — as the antithesis of burnout (Halbesleben, 2004) — and time — as measured by job tenure (Goddard, 1999). It has been referenced as a gauge of job involvement (Harter, Schmidt & Hayes, 2002), and used interchangeably with commitment (McCashland, 1999) and optimism (Conlin, 2009).

The inconsistency is mind boggling. No wonder there is confusion and debate over the construct validity of employee engagement. However, the theoretical underpinnings of employee engagement are well documented.

A rigorous hypothetical framework for employee engagement was introduced by Kahn (1990), whereby he described it as different from other employee role constructs such as job involvement, commitment or intrinsic motivation. Engagement is about the psychological experiences of work and how they shape the process of people presenting and absenting themselves during task performances. He went on to argue that engagement is a multidimensional construct, in that employees could be emotionally, cognitively and/or physically engaged. Although for psychological engagement and organizational behaviors, the two major dimensions are emotional and cognitive. Employees may be engaged on one dimension and not the other. The higher the engagement in each dimension, the higher the employee’s overall personal engagement.

There was, of course, antecedent research guiding Kahn’s exploration of this topic. He cited Goffman’s study of the sociology of human interaction (1961a), which stated that people’s attachment and detachment to roles vary. Goffman’s work, however, focused on transitory face-to-face encounters, and a different concept was necessary for organizational life, which is ongoing, emotionally charged and psychologically complex (Diamond & Allcorn, 1985).

The disciplines of psychology (Freud, 1922), sociology (Goffman, 1961b; Merton, 1957) and group theory (Bion, 1961; Slater, 1966; Smith & Berg, 1987) are congruent on the notion that people are inherently ambivalent about being members of ongoing groups and systems. Consequently, they seek to protect themselves from both isolation and engulfment by alternately pulling away from and moving towards group membership. This push and pull is a way of calibrating one's self with one's role and enables coping with internal ambivalence and external conditions. The terms Kahn (1990) used to describe these calibrations of self- in-role were personal engagement and personal disengagement.

Kahn (1990) defined personal engagement as the “harnessing of organization members’ selves to their work roles; in engagement, people employ and express themselves physically, cognitively, and emotionally during role performances” (p. 694). He then 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” (p. 694).

Coinage of the term “employee engagement” in the business lexicon is attributable to the Gallup Research group. Their concept of engagement is resultant of 30 years of in-depth research involving more than 12 million employees, with the intent of creating a comparative measure of organizational outcomes. In this subject area, Gallup research is widely considered the benchmark and is manifest in an array of published books, practitioner magazines, academic journals and websites. (Gallup.com)

Gallup defines employee engagement as the commitment to an organization of employees’ heads, hearts and souls, along with their intrinsic desire and passion for excellence. Engaged employees want their organization to succeed because they feel connected emotionally, socially, and even spiritually to its mission, vision and purpose. This engagement is exhibited by the following behaviors:

- Consistent levels of high performance.
- Natural innovation and drive for efficiency.
- Intentional building of supportive relationships.
- Clarity with regard to the desired outcomes of their role.
- Emotional commitment to what they do.

- High energy and enthusiasm.
- Commitment to company, work group, and role.

The one common phrase that spans several definitions and descriptions of employee engagement is “discretionary effort.” It appears that the concept of discretionary effort was first mentioned by Yankelovich and Immerwahr (1984), who defined it as the voluntary effort employees provide above and beyond what is required.

In an unpublished thesis for Macquarie University in Sydney, Australia, Dr. Rosemarie Lloyd (2003) introduced a discretionary effort scale that indicates intensity and perseverance over time. The scale shows properties consisting of actions that are voluntary and indicate a performance orientation. Measurement includes items that track, for example, longitudinal persistence in activities and the devotion of additional time and effort to achieve a result in a quicker timeframe.

Effort — discretionary or otherwise — is often linked to motivation and even used synonymously at times (Brown & Peterson, 1994). However, research supports the distinction between the two. Effort and motivation are different constructs in that motivation is “the degree to which employees are willing to expend effort on the job” (Dubinsky & Hartley, 1986, p. 37) or, according to Meyer, Becker and Vandenberghe (2004), “reflects an intention to act” (p. 995). Effort, on the other hand, is “the means by which motivation is translated into accomplished work” (Parsons, 1968, cited in Brown & Leigh, 1996, p. 362). In other words, motivation is the intention and effort is the act. And though discretionary effort is not observable behaviorally, an individual’s actions resultant of discretionary effort are tangible and integral to engagement.

The Business Case for Employee Engagement

Despite the term’s inconsistent usage in today’s vocabulary, many companies see engagement as a powerful source for potential advantage. Corporate results have demonstrated a strong linkage between some conceptualizations of employee engagement, performance and business outcomes. As a result, there

is no shortage of consulting firms bolstering their repertoire of services with maps, models and methodologies for engaging employees. An abridged list of firms hawking engagement — along with their own particular brand of assessment and effectuation — include AchieveGlobal, BlessingWhite, Gallup, The Hay Group, Hewitt Associates, McKinsey & Company, Towers Perrin, Watson Wyatt, et al.

Following are just a few examples of the myriad interpretations of employee engagement:

- The Gallup Organization: Gallup's evaluative instrument designed to measure employee engagement, called the Gallup Workplace Audit, comprises the following 12 questions:
 - 1) Do I know what's expected of me at work?
 - 2) Do I have the materials and equipment I need to do my work right?
 - 3) At work, do I have the opportunity to do what I do best every day?
 - 4) In the last seven days, have I received recognition or praise for doing good work?
 - 5) Does my supervisor, or someone at work, seem to care about me as a person?
 - 6) Is there someone at work who encourages my development?
 - 7) At work, do my opinions count?
 - 8) Does the mission/purpose of my company make me feel my job is important?
 - 9) Are my co-workers committed to doing quality work?
 - 10) Do I have a best friend at work?
 - 11) In the last six months, has someone at work talked to me about my progress?
 - 12) This last year, have I had opportunities at work to learn and grow?

These empirically derived questions indicate a statistically significant relationship between employee engagement and productivity, profitability, retention, safety and customer satisfaction.

The research purports that employees who score high on the questions are emotionally engaged in the work and the organization (Buckingham & Coffman, 1999; Coffman & Gonzalez-Molina, 2002).

For Gallup's purposes, Coffman and Gonzalez-Molina (2002) categorize employees into three classifications: actively engaged, non-engaged, and actively disengaged. In an interview with the Gallup Management Journal (2002, April 15), Coffman described the categories thusly:

“The ‘engaged’ employees are builders. They use their talents, develop productive relationships, and multiply their effectiveness through those relationships. They perform at consistently high levels. They drive innovation and move their organization forward. The employees that are ‘not engaged’ aren’t necessarily negative or positive about their company. They basically take a wait-and-see attitude toward their job, their employer, and their coworkers. They hang back and don't commit themselves.

This brings us to the ‘actively disengaged’ employees — the ‘cave dwellers.’ They’re ‘Consistently Against Virtually Everything.’ We’ve all worked with an actively disengaged employee who is not just unhappy at work; he *acts out* that unhappiness. Every day, actively disengaged employees tear down what their engaged coworkers are building.”

The same Gallup Management Journal article cites research showing, per Gallup's calculations, actively disengaged employees cost the American economy up to \$350 billion per year in lost productivity. And according to Gallup's 2008 macro-level data, an average of 20 percent of the U.S. workforce is actively disengaged, while 50 percent is not engaged, and just 30 percent is actually engaged.

- BlessingWhite: In May 2008, global consulting firm BlessingWhite released its latest findings on the state of employee engagement. The study included interviews with Human Resources leaders, as well as online survey responses of 7,508 individuals from North America, India, Europe, Southeast Asia (including Australia) and China. For the purpose of the study, they defined engaged employees as “those who are excited and use their talents and discretionary efforts to make a difference for their employers.” (BlessingWhite.com)

Congruous with Gallup Research statistics, BlessingWhite's data purported 29 percent of American employees were fully engaged, while 19 percent were disengaged. They stratified employees by the following five segmentations:

- 1) **Engaged:** Employees who work at the juncture of personal and organizational interests. They contribute fully to the success of the organization and find great satisfaction in their work. When recruiters call, they cut the conversation short.
 - 2) **Almost Engaged:** High performing employees who are reasonably satisfied with their job. They are very employable and likely to be lured to greener pastures if not transitioned from almost to highly engaged.
 - 3) **Honeymooners and Hamsters:** Honeymooners are new to either the organization or their role, and happy to be there. This is a temporal state. They have yet to find their stride and clearly understand how they can best contribute. Hamsters may be working hard but, essentially, "spinning their wheels" working on non-essential tasks and contributing little to the success of the organization. Coworkers may grow resentful at having to pick up the slack for this contingent if management doesn't effectively deal with them.
 - 4) **Crash & Burners:** Disillusioned and potentially exhausted employees who were once top producers but have become negative toward management and coworkers. They may leave the organization, though are just as likely to scale back effort due to their feelings of beleaguerment.
 - 5) **Disengaged:** These employees are the most disconnected from the organization. They feel underutilized, are clearly not getting what they need from work, are likely to be skeptical or cynical and may engage in contagious negativity. They are most likely to collect a paycheck while complaining and/or looking for a new job.
- **Towers Perrin:** Now known as Towers Watson & Company, resultant of a recent merger of equals with Watson Wyatt, this is a global professional services firm that helps organizations

improve performance through effective people, risk and financial management. In October 2007, the firm released the findings of its latest Global Workforce Study that they claim is the largest of its kind. The study avers to identify the drivers of attraction, retention and engagement through the eyes of employees at mid to large size organizations worldwide.

For the purpose of their survey, Towers defines engagement as “employees’ willingness and ability to contribute to company success. Put another way, engagement is the extent to which employees ‘go the extra mile’ and put discretionary effort into their work — contributing more of their energy, creativity and passion on the job.” (Towersperrin.com)

The Global Workforce Study draws on two unique sources of employee data: 1) a Web-based survey administered to a randomized sample of approximately 90,000 full-time employees from mid to large size organizations in 18 countries and; 2) a normative database of more than two million employees from a broad range of companies.

In alignment with the findings of Gallup and BlessingWhite, Towers’ research showed that 29 percent of American workers were engaged and 28 percent of employees were disenchanted or disengaged. Although aside from the differences of survey methodology and analytics, this is not an apples-to-apples data comparison. Harkening to Kahn’s (1990) evidential research indicating engagement as a multidimensional construct that is cognitive, physical and emotional, Towers’ assessment factors employees’ connections to the organization across these three dimensions. They term it as follows:

“‘Head, hands, and heart’ ...the sum total of these three elements is what we used to measure overall employee engagement levels.

- ‘Head’ refers to the rational part of the engagement equation, how employees connect with their company’s goals and values.
- ‘Hands’ refer to the employee’s willingness to put in a great deal of extra effort to help the company succeed.

- ‘Heart’ is the emotional connection between employee and employer, such as the employee’s pride in the organization.

Based on a statistical analysis of their responses to the full set of questions, survey respondents are clustered into four groups:

- 1) Engaged: Those giving full discretionary effort, with high scores on all three dimensions.
- 2) Enrolled: The partly engaged, with higher scores on the rational and motivational dimensions, but less connected emotionally.
- 3) Disenchanted: The partly disengaged, with lower scores on all three components of engagement, especially the emotional connection.
- 4) Disengaged: Those who have disconnected rationally, emotionally and motivationally.”
(Towersperrin.com)

Conclusion

According to a 2008 –2009 study of the U.S. workforce by global consulting firm Watson Wyatt, companies with highly engaged employees enjoy 26 percent higher employee productivity, have less turnover and are more likely to attract top talent. Additionally, these companies earned 13 percent greater total returns for shareholders over the last five years. Watson Wyatt’s survey goes on to claim that highly engaged employees are twice as likely as their less engaged peers to be top performers; they miss 20 percent fewer days of work; and three-quarters of them exceeded expectations in their most recent performance review. Also, engaged workers tend to be more supportive of organizational change initiatives and more resilient in the face of change. The report surveyed more than 13,000 full-time U.S. workers in May and June 2008. (WatsonWyatt.com)

Coffman and Gonzalez-Molina (2002), pronounced that engaged employees are the economic force that fuels an organization’s profit growth. Indeed, engagement is key to the most effective and successful use of an organization’s human capital. Recent studies show that a majority of today’s workers

want more than a paycheck and are desirous of greater meaning and personal development through their employment. Many employees seek a blend of vocation and avocation, viewing their work as more of a calling — enjoyable, fulfilling and socially useful (Avolio & Sosik, 1999; Wrzesniewski, McCauley, Rozin & Schwartz, 1997; Harter, Schmidt & Keyes, 2002).

Without question, employee engagement is a complex equation. It reflects each individual's unique, personal relationship with work. It is highly personal, as it aligns with a person's core values and how fully he or she is empowered and enabled to live those values in the workplace. Thus, the alignment of employees' values, goals and ambitions with those of the organization will likely result in the sustainable employee engagement required for an organization to attain its highest aspirations.

Although there are widely varying claims of the return on an organization's expenditure in obtaining an engaged employee populace, the body of empirical research indicates it to be a sound investment. A corporation has no more precious an attribute or asset than a committed, cohesive and cooperative workforce (Bradford & Burke, 2005). To achieve competitive advantage, organizations must enable and encourage a workplace where engagement is the norm. And equally important, they must foster a culture that attracts individuals disposed to succeeding in this type of environment, thereby creating a virtuous cycle. In other words, the key to an engaged workforce is an engagement culture (Macey, Schneider, Barbera & Young, 2009).

It would seem that the value of employee engagement is obvious. Engaged employees are not just committed. They are not just passionate or proud. Employees who are engaged have a line-of-sight on their own future as well as the organization's mission and goals. They are enthused and in gear, and use their talents and discretionary effort to propel their employer's quest for enduring business success.

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