



# What's

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underused, or abused.**

# the Big Deal

## About Employee Engagement

By Paula Ketter

For several years, employee engagement has been a hot topic in the executive suite because there's mounting evidence that employee engagement correlates to individual, group, and organizational performance in the areas of productivity, retention, turnover, customer service, and loyalty.

It also has captured the attention of workplace learning and performance professionals, but according to many experts, engagement isn't a new concept.

"We are pretending that engagement is a new thing," says Beverly Kaye of Career Systems International. "Engagement is a new word for a very old thing. Engagement is a new word for motivation, passion, and commitment.

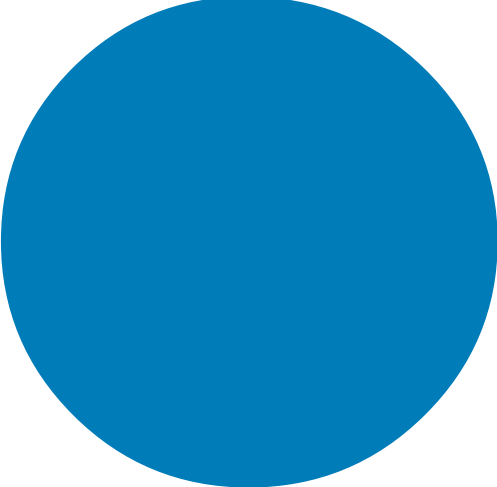
Are you motivating your people, are you caring about your people, and are you challenging your people?"

Jean Martin, executive director of the Corporate Leadership Council agrees, adding, "Engagement is made up of rational and emotional commitment. On the rational side, it is largely about getting enough compensation and development opportunities to make it worth your while. Emotional commitment is the ever-elusive love of your job and love of your manager or organization."

According to Kaye, engagement became a topic for concern in early 2000 when the dotcom bubble burst, 9/11 occurred, the economy dipped, and



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unemployment rose. At that time, the common response from managers to employees was, “You should be happy you have a job.” Work expectations rose, while companies froze employees’ pay. The result was a disengaged workforce.

According to a Towers Perrin study, only 21 percent of the global workforce is engaged, while 38 percent is disengaged. That leaves 41 percent who are unsure whether they like their jobs or not.

“A buzzword becomes big when the pain is great enough,” Kaye explains. “Employees have been put through so much and they finally realize that they have choices elsewhere, and that has caused pain for employers who are afraid of losing them. Employers have started doing engagement surveys, engagement studies, and engagement workshops to develop engagement strategies.

I don’t think it is any different than what learning professionals have tried to do—and that’s build a development culture, one where everyone is used to giving their maximum effort in the workplace.

“Engagement is all about creating a culture where people do not feel misused, overused, underused, or abused,” Kaye adds. “Now that employees have options—and they will have these options for at least another decade—if they feel any of those things, they can jump ship and that will cause a lot of angst for the ship they left behind.”

Martin admits that the turmoil surrounding organizational change during the last five years has forced employees “to do more with less,” and that mandate is forcing many employees to “check out” or lose their commitment at work.

“Our data has proven, year after year, that the emotional side of engagement is actually four times more powerful than the rational side when it comes to driving the business impacts we care about, which are essentially employees who want to stay with the company and employee productivity,” Martin says. “One specific finding is that when employees move from being disengaged to being highly engaged, their productivity improves 20 percentage points in performance levels.”

The impending retirement of the baby boomers, the competitive job market, and the multigenerational workforce also are placing more importance on engagement in the workplace. These factors are pressing organizations to find ways to retain their top talent and that is necessitating the need for engaged workers.

“The newer generations in the workforce also are speaking up, saying, ‘I am not a happy camper and you need to do more to keep me here, or I am going to pick up my skill set and go somewhere else, where they will take advantage of my skills,’” Kaye

says. “Those younger workers also are giving voice to boomers and mature workers, who have been there all along griping by the water cooler or to each other.”

Many different engagement studies—from Gallup Organization, Towers Perrin, Hewitt, Blessing White, the Corporate Leadership Council, and the Conference Board—have used different definitions of engagement to come up with 26 key drivers of engagement that managers must take into consideration when supervising employees. Those drivers include doing exciting and challenging work; having career growth and learning and development opportunities; working with great people; receiving fair pay; having supportive management; and being recognized, valued, and respected.

“The top drivers of engagement come down to the employee’s connection between their work and the organization’s success. The second driver is an employee’s belief that his work matters to the organization,” Martin says. “Both of those drivers are determined by senior leadership’s communication with the employee.”

### Stay interview

Engagement studies are being done predominately to retain top employees. Although it is now just as important to use them to examine employee productivity, keeping top employees is critical in today’s competitive job market where a skills shortage is creating fewer qualified job candidates.

“When a manager utters the words, ‘What can I do to keep you?’ it is usually during an exit interview with the employee. By then, it is usually too late,” Kaye explains. “The response they normally get is ‘You could have kept me if you had just done ...’”

Employee interviews usually take place when the employee enters and exits the organization, but Kaye suggests that stay interviews should be

conducted monthly on a one-on-one basis with the employee in a neutral setting, such as a coffee shop.

“It’s when you look the employee in the eye and say, ‘You are precious talent to me. I know you have choices and options, but I don’t want you to leave. What matters to you, and what can I do to keep you?’”

Many managers fear that the answer will be about money, an issue that cannot always be rectified at that moment. Kaye says to be honest and tell the employee that you can’t deliver more money right now, but to also ask what else matters.

“That will be different for everyone,” Kaye says. “It’s an individual question. Some employees may want to travel less, or come in late one day a week because their child has a play at school, or go to a particular conference to improve their skill set.

“If you get to the bottom of what really matters, it is cheaper than finding a whole new person at twice the salary,” Kaye adds. “I don’t think some managers really get it. The lament from managers is that they don’t have time to do the stay interview, but what I try to do is show them what little time it really takes.”

According to Kaye’s book, *Love ‘Em or Lose ‘Em*, the stay interview should include the following questions:

- What about your job makes you jump out of bed in the morning?
- What makes you hit the snooze button?
- If you were to win the lottery and resign, what would you miss the most?
- What would be the one thing that, if it changed in your current role, would make you consider moving on?
- If you had a magic wand, what would be the one thing you would change about this department?
- If you had to go back to a position in your past and stay for an extended period of time, which one would it be and why?

“All the generations want to stay in one job—they don’t want to job

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**Jean Martin**  
Executive Director, Corporate Leadership Council

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hop—but some will want more,” Kaye explains. “They want the same things but their definitions of those things may be different. It is up to the manager to be curious enough to want to know what drives each person.”

### **Employee responsibility**

So many engagement studies highlight the importance of management’s communication with their employees and their practice of engagement strategies in the workplace, but engagement is a two-way street. Employees have a responsibility of their own.

“Managers are not going to be able to love all 50 employees, so employees are going to have to learn to do it themselves and help one another,” Kaye says. “Companies are afraid that if they let employees get together it will turn into a gripe session. The fact is, they are griping already.”

Employees need to ask for what they want and express their feelings about worth, their job, and their career aspirations. Managers are not mind readers. While they bear the brunt of some of the responsibility to find out what makes their employees tick, employees need to take engagement surveys seriously.

“I believe the individual is ultimately responsible for their own engagement while the organization and leadership is accountable for employee engagement,” David Zinger, an independent consultant in Manitoba, Canada, writes on his blog.

Zinger suggests that employees know their strengths, take responsibility for their work while holding others accountable for theirs, and find time to disengage from work to re-energize.

### **Engagement model**

What started out as a satisfaction survey morphed into an engagement survey three years ago when Accenture grew globally. Last year, the company hired 60,000 employees worldwide.

“A lot of metrics we are currently measuring we have been measuring for years,” says Richard Westphal, U.S. retain talent lead and work-life director at Accenture. “We just didn’t have a formal process in place to measure engagement, which links more directly to business results.”

Using the Hewitt Associates’s engagement model, Accenture examined three aspects of engagement: say, stay, and strive. As the human resources department researched various points of view

about what employee engagement is, it focused on these three dimensions, covering the rational as well as the emotional dimensions of engagement.

“First, we assessed the pride an employee has in being associated with the organization by examining how positively they speak about the organization and who would recommend the organization to others as a great place to work,” Westphal explains. “Second, we looked at who

demonstrates a strong commitment to stay with the organization.”

The first two were already being assessed in our satisfaction surveys. When the survey morphed into an engagement survey, the third and final tier, strive, was added.

Westphal explains, “It’s what is called ‘discretionary effort.’ Do employees take an active role in the overall success of the organization by moving beyond just doing tasks to going above and beyond?”

The survey is generally done online. It consists of 75 questions organized by the six major categories of engagement: the people with whom we work, the work we do, the development opportunities available, the rewards and recognition, the company itself, and the work environment.

Out of the 170,000 employees at Accenture, Westphal says they get an 80 percent overall participation with between 70 and 73 percent survey participation in the United States and United Kingdom. There is about a 92 percent participation rate in China and India.

“We ask everything from ‘Do benefit plans meet my (and my family’s) needs?’ and ‘Does your supervisor demonstrate the company’s core values?’ to ‘Are you getting the coaching and mentoring you need to improve your performance?’” says Westphal.

“When we look at the data, we look at everything from engagement scores to how people take surveys,” he adds. “There is a difference in how certain cultures take surveys. Some cultures tend to be more positive and some tend to be more cynical and this needs to be understood in evaluating the scores. What we see is that engagement drivers differ more by country than by the work people do or the organization they are in. For example, work-life balance and benefits are driven more by the individual countries because what you do for flexibility in the United States is very different than what you would do in Mexico.”

Despite instituting global and team surveys, Accenture searched for a

way to bring engagement down to the individual employees. Engagement is a very personal issue and can mean different things to different people, so Accenture created a personal engagement scorecard to drive communication between employees and their leaders, supervisors, mentors, or career counselors.

The scorecard asks employees to rate six categories—company practices, opportunities, people, quality of life, competitive rewards, and work—by level of importance from one to six and then by satisfaction level on a scale of one to 10. The list, according to Westphal, should be filled out by the employee and discussed with leaders or supervisors at least twice a year, at the mid-year review and the annual review or when one’s role changes.

“There is a trust factor here,” Westphal explains. “If an employee rates compensation a number 5 in importance that does not mean it is unimportant, just less important than something else. Some people may rank career as number 1 and work-life balance as number 2, but what does that really mean? What if the best career option for that employee is to move to London and work there? Is that really what the employee wants to do?”

The discussion, according to Westphal, should center on the question, “Is this who you are or who you want to be?”

“It comes down to ‘what can I as a leader do to help you as an employee meet your personal priorities?’” he says. “It has now become a real tangible benefit in a career counseling discussion or a supervisory discussion. This list forces leadership to talk about the employee, not themselves.”

Although Accenture didn’t find many differences in engagement drivers between the generations, Westphal admits that there is a big difference in how the generations approach this individual list.

“The new generation doesn’t want to make tradeoffs,” he says. “They want it all. The older generations realize that they may have to give up A to get B,

# Personal Engagement Scorecard

Rank the following by level of importance and then rate your satisfaction level with each. Include comments to help explain rankings and ratings.

	Rank importance	Rate satisfaction	Comments
<b>Company practices</b> (practices and policies, company reputation, diversity and inclusion, performance assessment)			
<b>Opportunities</b> (career opportunities, learning and development)			
<b>People</b> (senior leadership, manager, co-workers, clients)			
<b>Quality of life</b> (work-life balance, physical work, enforcement, safety)			
<b>Competitive rewards</b> (pay, benefits, recognition)			
<b>Work</b> (work activities, processes, resources)			

Source: Accenture, based on the Hewitt Associates Engagement Model

but the younger generation has always gotten it all, so the tradeoff discussion is more difficult for them.”

This list addresses the fundamental misunderstanding that improving engagement is management’s job, Westphal says. Instead, it involves a continuous dialogue between employees and their supervisors—both need to be intimately involved.

“This list is an incredibly simple tool that has opened up discussions in a way that most people didn’t think it would. The discussion is the magic; if you don’t have the discussion, then it’s a worthless tool,” Westphal adds. “Unfortunately, a lot of us are stereotyping the generations when we should be individualizing them. What the personal engagement list does is help us understand what’s important to each person

and sometimes a Gen Y really does look more like a Boomer and without asking specifically, we never know.”

## Engagement strategies

There is no one-size-fits-all solution to creating an engaged workforce. Research shows that there is no correlation between size of the workforce or size of the company and the different engagement drivers.

“All generations want balance, and all generations want satisfaction at work,” Kaye says. “All generations also want to have a good manager who appreciates them.”

Creating cultures that value learning, career advancement, and employee engagement are not easy, but they are essential to organizational success and employee performance.

However, as Kaye points out, surveying your employees and changing the culture are two very different things.

“So many companies are paying a lot of money to perform engagement studies and then they are spending a lot of time coming up with strategies to implement and presenting a report to the executive suite. But they aren’t investing in the actions—they are not implementing the strategies and therefore are wasting a lot of money for nothing,” Kaye says. **T+D**

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### WHAT DO YOU THINK?

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