

# Employee engagement - the real secret of winning a crucial edge over your rivals

Dr Charles Woodruffe

Having employees who are thoroughly motivated and truly *engaged* with what they are doing is the most powerful competitive weapon any organisation can enjoy. Dr Charles Woodruffe explains why, and offers advice on how to achieve this ideal condition.

'I love work,' the Victorian humorist Jerome K. Jerome remarks in his comic masterpiece *Three Men in a Boat*, 'I could watch it for hours.' But the energy and sheer verve of his book leave us in no doubt that, in fact, he certainly did adore his work as a comic writer. The success of the book, which has never been out of print, reminds us that the fruits of truly passionate and devoted work can even live on beyond our natural lifespan.

Most of us, though, don't seek immortality in our work but rather the supreme pleasure, right now, of complete focus and concentration on something we really want to do. The question is, how can organisations absolutely maximise the proportion of their employees who regard their jobs in this way?

Chief executives of most organisations rarely miss an opportunity to remind their audience (and themselves) that their people are their most precious asset. Certainly, in the highly sophisticated economies in which organisations operate today, where every player can gain access to a similar calibre and quality of technology, and where basically all players need to pay about the same for their financing, premises and other key resources - it is a matter of sheer commercial logic that an organisation's people represent the most crucial weapon in its bid for competitive supremacy.

The trouble is, organisations by no means necessarily put this thinking into practice by taking every step to ensure that every member of staff *wants* to

perform to the very highest levels of which they are personally capable. Instead, the process of attrition of morale and energy can begin almost the instant a new employee takes up a position. For far too many people, the initial interview that led to them being given the job may represent the most positive and idealistic experience they ever have with the organisation. All too often, it's downhill all the way after that.

This is not only tragic for the people involved, it is also commercially nonsensical for the organisation employing them. An organisation whose staff aren't fully committed and giving their all cannot possibly be doing justice to itself at any level.

Fortunately, more and more organisations - especially those in the ever more important service sector - have become attuned to the idea that there is not much point in employing people at all if you are not going to take steps to make them want to give their very best to you. All the same, it's by no means the case that *every* organisation thinks in this way, and even if the organisation does think in this way, it still needs to put this thinking into practice.

There are still some chief executives and managing directors who think their employees will be motivated to give a great performance simply because the company has hired them. They see money as a cure-all; their logic being that if they pay their employees enough they'll put up with anything and have no reason to grumble. But this is very faulty and outdated thinking.

Of course most people need to work today in order to earn a living, but while the necessity to earn a living may be the main reason why most people work, it does not follow from this that money is always the main factor motivating people when they decide to work for one organisation rather than another.

In practice, people are likely to be swayed by a range of other, non-financial, factors when deciding where they will work. This is particularly true of really talented people, who tend to have a good idea of the market rate they can command and will be looking for a prospective employer who can offer this market rate *and* other advantages. Overall, while the precise reasons why people work will vary from one individual to the next, it is nonetheless possible to make some useful general observations about employee motivation.

First of all, in today's employment market, where the notion of cradle to grave secure employment is in most cases an increasingly distant memory, people are more and more conscious of the need to maximise their *employability*. A big reason why people take a job in the first place, and why they might be motivated to give it their very best, concerns how they imagine the experience they are gaining will look on their CV.

Furthermore, they will expect *ongoing* development at the organisation where they work. They will be very likely to go somewhere else if they don't get that sense of being developed.

In today's tough job market where there is strong competition among employers for talented people, employers need to understand that the training and development they extend to all their employees - and especially to their more talented ones - will not only make employees more able and more valuable to you, but will also act as a powerful incentive for them to stay. Of course, organisations are always at risk that their staff will leave, taking their new skills with them. Yet employees of organisations that *don't* develop their staff have little motivation to stay. This is a paradox, but it is one with a simple solution: accept that employees are more likely to leave if they *aren't* developed, and find ways to make people *want* to keep working at your organisation.

Fortunately, there are certain constructive courses of action you can pursue to make people want to stay with you. And moving literally to the other side of the coin, the very fact that money is *not* by any means necessarily the main factor in people's decision to take a job in the first place or to keep working at a job once they have got it, means there is considerable scope for employers to make conscious efforts to offer their employees non-financial motivations that employees crave so much.

## Among the most important non-financial motivations are:

- **advancement** - people at work set great store by the extent to which they perceive that their job is giving them the opportunity for career advancement, both on a short-term and long-term basis.
- **autonomy** - most people, and all talented people, like to be able to get 'on a roll' as far as work is concerned. A degree of real autonomy, where someone can really get 'into' their jobs, is likely to be welcome.
- **civilised treatment** - even today, when organisations know perfectly well how expensive it is to recruit good people and how costly and disruptive it can be if good people resign, too many organisations treat people in a brusque, even uncivilised way. The problem may often arise because a line manager or middle manager who is responsible for the people in question is himself or herself working under great stress and, in effect 'kicks downwards'. But such behaviour needs to be weeded out. It can easily wipe out a great deal of effort by a human resources department in recruiting and motivating someone and then doing everything they can to help them settle into a particular job and be successful at it.
- **employer commitment** - people like to feel that their employers are genuinely committed to them and to their careers.
- **environment** - a pleasant working environment is always welcome, especially in a high-pressure job where stress caused by a not especially agreeable environment can easily have a strong negative effect on performance.
- **exposure to senior people** - most employees like to feel they are being noticed by an organisation's senior people and that they could approach these people if necessary for advice and guidance.
- **praise is awarded when praise is due** - one of the classic signs of poor management occurs when staff are given *negative* feedback for what is perceived as poor performance, but never given *positive* feedback. Extending people praise where praise is due often requires a negligible amount of time on the part of a manager or even energy, but the emotional benefits to the member of staff can be enormous.
- **support is available** - employees like to feel that there is someone available to whom they can turn for advice if they need it.
- **the feeling of being challenged** - employees like to feel challenged, given that they believe they have the tools and skills to respond to the

## Ten-point plan on how to engage your employees

1. Get a public statement of commitment from the Chief Executive and the Board on the importance of retaining talent by developing good people management practices.
2. Ensure that all line managers take on this culture of talent retention. Ensure they understand this is a core part of the organisation's business strategy to win in its marketplace.
3. Treat every member of your staff as an individual. Find out his or her needs at work, and give careful thought to meeting them.
4. Ensure your managers are supported and coached in their people management skills.
5. Carry out regular employee satisfaction audits.
6. Take scrupulous care to ensure you hire talented people to whom you can offer a commitment.
7. Don't destroy the trust of your employees with a 'hire and fire' mentality.
8. Be absolutely sure to develop your people so their worth to you increases.
9. Challenge any reasons your organisation has for not being flexible and responsive to your people's needs.
10. Carefully identify your core talent so that you invest scarce resources on developing these people.

challenge successfully. Sometimes employees can respond with surprising resilience, energy and commitment to even a really demanding challenge. Of course, too much of a struggle can be counter productive and induce people to consider jumping ship, but the sense of taking part in a struggle can also be energising. Remember that when Winston Churchill wanted to rally the British people into giving their very best effort in 1940, he did not promise them fish and chips, real ale and comfortable mattresses to sleep on, but 'blood, toil, tears and sweat.'

- **the feeling of being trusted** - feeling trusted is a gratifying feeling because it makes one feel a useful part of the team and confers significant status. As social animals, we will habitually - and often for very good reasons - withhold trust until we believe that extending this is justified. Employees know this, so the bestowal of trust is quite rightly regarded as extremely important. Employees who feel trusted are more likely to feel a useful and important part of an organisation and are more likely to confer loyalty on their organisation.
- **the feeling of working for a good and reliable organisation** - people want to be proud of their jobs and of their organisations they work for. People are unlikely to have much staying power at an organisation they perceive, rightly or wrongly, as a cowboy outfit.
- **the feeling of working on useful assignments** - Napoleon reputedly used to keep his army busy during slack times between battles by sending one half of his army out into fields to dig holes and subsequently sending the other half of the army into the same fields to fill them up. Doing this might have been useful for logistics and morale purposes, as otherwise the soldiers would have remained idle and bored. But it would hardly have been a successful ruse if the two halves of the army ever got a chance to meet each other and discuss their day's work. The point is that the feeling that one is doing a truly useful assignment is extremely powerful as a factor motivating employees. Of course the assignment has to be *genuinely* useful. Every employee, no matter which rung they accommodate on the corporate hierarchy, wants to feel important and valued, and there is no better way of helping an employee feel this than by giving him or her some genuinely significant assignment on which to work.
- **the work/life balance is respected** - employees know they are going to have to work hard, but an employer who shows sensitivity to work/life balance issues is very likely to outscore one who doesn't.

Ultimately, all these elements of positive motivation are contributing factors to the overall level of *engagement* the employee brings to his or her job. This term, engagement, is being used increasingly at an organisational level to denote the idea of an employee being fully intellectually and emotionally committed to a particular job, so that he or she *wants* to give to that job what is known as *discretionary effort*. This is the effort which it is not necessary for an employee to give to a job but which he or she *wants* to give to it.

The term engagement is useful, emotionally honest and authentic due to its connotations with commitment, bonding and even affection. But it is important to distinguish clearly between the process of engaging employees by helping them to love their jobs and to want to give their best to the jobs, and the very different process of hiring employees in the first place following a recruitment drive.

Engaging employees is important whatever the potential of the employee, but it is especially crucial for truly talented people who are likely to have leadership potential either now or in the future. Engaging talented people needs to be a top organisational priority because they are by definition

especially precious possessions. They are particularly likely to find another berth if they don't feel that this one meets their demanding needs for job satisfaction, purpose and sense of self-worth.

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