

The me factor

Everyone's an individual, so why should our motivations be the same, argues Ben Palmer

With the war for talent returning to pre-GFC levels, employee engagement is back on the top priority list of many organisations. Employee engagement drives productivity, performance and profitability. It is necessary for talent retention and creates the environment for business growth.

The most common method organisations adopt to improve engagement is a survey method. This method involves measuring engagement anonymously at the group level with a company-wide engagement survey, identifying some levers that could be pulled to enhance the engagement of a group (like providing better career opportunities, better leadership or more autonomy), and implementing these initiatives for a group. When done well this process undoubtedly pays dividends. It produces a strategic HR road map for improving productivity, and if your organisation has never done something like this, or hasn't done it for some time, it's a great place to start, however some organisations are adopting new methods to create a motivated and engaged workforce. They are individualising engagement, creating shared responsibility for it with their employees, and equipping managers to facilitate it with their staff. Individual motivators are by definition elements of work that are motivating to some, but not to others.

There is a growing body of new research showing that a large amount of employee engagement is driven by individual motivators not captured by this group survey method. Because of this individual nature it makes little sense to measure them at the group level. According to the academic literature in this area individual motivational factors exist in four areas. Role motivational factors cover different day-to-day elements of work, like working with customers, enforcing rules and regulations, working at a fast pace or with challenging intellectual tasks. Management motivational factors are, in essence, different leadership styles from directive to empowering. Team motivational factors cover different team qualities like working virtually, having well-organised and planned teamwork or working with highly ambitious team members. Finally, organisation motivation factors cover different organisational characteristics such as levels of remuneration and benefits, a commitment to social responsibility initiatives or clear levels of management and authority.

Using a unique motivation questionnaire Genos recently surveyed over 1900 people from a broad range of industries to examine just how individual these motivational factors can be. The results reveal some interesting findings on the individual nature of motivation. Of those surveyed, 24 per cent reported being unmotivated by working in a fast-pace environment with tight deadlines; 37 per cent sat on the fence, being neither motivated nor unmotivated by this, and 39 per cent reported being highly motivated by it. Similarly, 43 per cent of people reported being unmotivated by a technical specialist manager.

Surprisingly, 39 per cent of people are neither motivated nor unmotivated by this, but 18 per cent of people are actually highly motivated to work for this type of manager. In short, the results confirm that while there are some universal things that motivate all of us (perhaps the most famous being the Gallup Q12 statements), motivation is proving to be more of an individual construct. Indeed one person's definition of an effective boss can be someone else's worse nightmare. Similarly, what one employee finds challenging or meaningful can bore another to tears.

So what happens to an individual's level of engagement when these individual motivational factors are met? The academic term for this alignment between what an individual is motivated by and their actual experience at work is motivational fit. Genos recently examined the relationship between 681 individuals' motivational fit-scores and their engagement scores across three different companies in Australia and Northern Ireland. The results show a strong positive relationship between levels of motivational fit and engagement. When individuals do the type of things they are motivated to do, when they experience a leadership style from their boss they find motivating, and when they are working with a team and organisation aligned to their motivational preferences, their engagement scores improve dramatically. The findings of the research show that up to 53 per cent of an individual's engagement score can be accounted just by management fit alone, that is, working for a boss who demonstrates the type of leadership style they find motivating.

Gwyneth Graham, head of leadership and culture at Ericsson, has begun complementing the traditional survey method with a program for managers on individual motivational fit and how managers can facilitate engagement at the individual level. The global CEO and HR director are driving this initiative and it is being rolled out right across the South East Asian and Oceania regions. Ericsson's program equips managers to sit down with their staff and understand what individually motivates them; how these preferences compare to their experience within the company; and importantly, how to create individual engagement action plans – actions the employee can take to improve their motivational fit and engagement, and actions the manager can take to support them. Graham says: "The biggest challenge managers face with this program is asking their staff to contrast how they experience their leadership, with the type of leadership they find motivating. Managers need a certain amount of emotional intelligence in order to do this well. Our program covers not only the process for the conversation but also how to 'be' in it to make it effective."

Aaron McEwan, director of Talent Management at Hudson, believes the methods being adopted by organisations such as Ericsson not only individualises engagement, it creates shared responsibility for it. McEwan says: "An unintended consequence of the survey only method is that it creates a perception in employees that engagement is something the organisation is solely responsible for. It can leave employees asking 'what are you going to do to engage me?'" Complementing a company-wide survey with a program that equips managers to facilitate individual engagement creates a shared ownership model, a model where there is some responsibility on the

organisation; some responsibility on managers; and importantly, and perhaps uniquely, some responsibility on individual employees to foster and enhance their employment experience with the company.

There may be a big opportunity to improve productivity in Australia from taking this more contemporary approach to facilitating employee engagement. According to the latest Blessing White research on global engagement scores, Australia comes in second only to India by 1 per cent. We have a larger percentage of engaged employees, than North America, Europe, South East Asia, and China. While this might sound impressive there is compelling evidence that suggests we need to innovate and do things differently if we want to maintain and enhance our engagement in Australia. Despite our national engagement score being higher than most other countries, the Society for Knowledge Economics estimates that disengagement (the percentage of employees not engaged with their work), costs our economy an estimated \$33 billion in lost productivity.

Some of these issues stem from the institutionalisation of engagement. This is the over adoption of the survey method for improving employee engagement. Engagement is institutionalised when the survey is completed every 12 or 24 months, with pulse checks in between, and the results are not only reported in annual reports, scores or improvements in them are tied to executive pay. Over time this institutionalisation of engagement moves this method from being something that identifies and actively engages employees to be something they expect. It becomes like a service level agreement or something you might have experienced flying business class. The first time it's great, the second it's good, particularly if executed better than first time, but by the third time it starts to become expected. When that hot towel isn't brought around after takeoff, or the dinner you wanted isn't available – annoyance and dissatisfaction sets in. In other words, running the survey and initiatives from it creates satisfaction but does not drive the value adding behaviours of an engaged employee.

There is no research on the return on investment from those organisations who have high levels of individual motivational fit across an organisation. Nonetheless, we know from research by Gallup that when people are extremely satisfied with their manager across an organisation, the ratio of engaged to disengaged employees broadens dramatically. This finding might reflect high levels of situational leadership and therefore high manager motivational fit. This type of critical mass of engaged employees produces very high performance and is typical of those companies in the Gallup research database who earn 3.9 times greater earnings per share than their industry competitors.

But how are high levels of individual motivational fit across an organisation achieved? One of the advantages of the survey method is its scalability. That is, the survey can be rolled out right across a large organisation relatively quickly. Rolling out a program and mandate for managers to facilitate individual engagement reviews and action plans will obviously take more time.

Ben Palmer is the Australian CEO of Genos International.

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