Personal Work Engagement
Validating a New, More Effective Model

Despite their best efforts and intentions, businesses have seen employee engagement all but stall in recent years. Only 13 percent of workers worldwide and 30 percent in the United States are fully engaged in their jobs. The majority of employees are “checked out” (Gallup Webcast, Jan. 28, 2016). These findings have remained relatively consistent since 2000 when Gallup began measuring and reporting on U.S. workplace engagement.

Galagan ("Employee Engagement: An Epic Failure?" Talent Development, March 8, 2015) estimated that about $1.5 billion a year is spent on consulting and training in the employee engagement sector in the U.S. alone. In years past, companies interested in measuring employee engagement typically relied on an annual engagement survey. Today, there is no shortage of technologies designed to improve and measure engagement: dedicated social recognition and engagement platforms; gamification; emotion-monitoring devices; messaging; and social networking. These tools are designed to promote unfettered communications, recognize achievements and give the organization insights into what needs to be fixed in the company culture. However, none of this has apparently moved the needle on employee engagement, which has remained stagnant for more than a decade. (Although beyond the scope of this article, there are significant issues to address in both the scientific validity of engagement measures and the methodologies used to collect and report on work-engagement data.)

The Lack of a Standard Definition for Engagement
Work engagement has been discussed for nearly two decades. But from the outset, there has not been an agreed upon single definition of work engagement.

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MacPherson (“The State of Employee Engagement,” white paper, 2014, Modern Survey, Minneapolis) is perhaps the most useful defining work engagement as the degree to which an employee is psychologically invested in the organization and motivated to contribute to its success. Examinations of work engagement have traditionally focused on the organization as the source of change of the engagement. This model is premised on training the individual on controlling his/her own personal work engagement. While previous definitions of work engagement have emphasized the employee’s emotional connection to the organization, our findings demonstrate that emotion is fundamentally a matter of the individual’s psychology and requires personalized intervention if the employee (and the organization) expect to see improved engagement.

Gallup uses its Q12 questionnaire to come up with a definition of engagement that refers to individuals who work with passion and feel a profound connection to their employer. There are therefore two distinct elements to this definition:

1) a passionate basis to employees’ everyday activity and
2) an emotional connection to their employer. Implicit in Gallup’s definition is the observation that emotional connection to an organization does not necessarily create superior task performance. Still, Gallup is the best source of information on international trends as presented in its 2016 report on international engagement levels.

The Role of the Employee “Personal Work Engagement”

Existing consulting models start with an assessment of the employees’ apparent engaged activities, using this information as a gauge of the organization’s overall engagement environment. While there is general agreement that the organization is the source of change, there is also agreement on the need for individual employee participation in order for programs to work — which is to say, an understanding of each individual’s psychology and which reinforcing factors need attention as they relate to engagement. But this
Maylett and Warner (2014) point out that engagement may have a contagious effect on other workers. Once started, workers may feed off of one another’s emotional connection to work.

attention to the importance of employee buy-in rarely moves beyond words of encouragement from the supervisor or organizational leader.

We contend that only after employees understand the importance of their role in improving engagement can we have a real understanding of how work engagement benefits both the company and employee. Our psychological model of personal work engagement (coined by Maylett and Warner in 2014) provides a motivational basis for maintaining high levels of personal work engagement as well as a method of maintaining high levels of productivity. It is based on the following constructs:

1 **Work ethic.** This addresses the “what’s in it for me?” question, returning to the basic belief in having a highly developed work ethic that parallels the emotional connection to the organization providing the paycheck. Establishing a good work ethic is the foundation of personal work engagement. From a basis of simple fairness to the employer for a good day’s work for a good day’s pay, we go on to show how having a good work ethic is also valuable to the worker as well.

1 **Personal meaning.** One internal source of reinforcement comes from the worker’s appreciation of the value of his/her work product. However, regular consideration of these efforts and what they create may provide a basis for increasing personal work engagement, especially when combined with other reflections. Some form of cognitive behavioral training may help the employee recognize the potential for multiple reinforcements in his/her unique case.

1 **Financial compensation.** Some of the literature on engagement has rejected salary as the basis for work engagement. In particular, Maylett and Warner (2014) asserted that work engagement is far more than salary. Financial compensation may not be the most important factor for everyone, but it is of some value to all who work and provides some motivating source for positive work engagement. More important, when combined with other reinforcements, salary can serve as a significant component of the construct.

1 **Family appreciation.** Some families openly express their gratitude for the things provided indirectly through good performance at work. This kind of reinforcement is usually unspoken, but the engaged worker is aware of how important the work is for the welfare of the family.

1 **Professional accolades.** One less common source of reinforcement comes from professional organizations or institutions. Having one's effort appreciated by peers in industry can have a profound impact on engagement.

1 **Coworker support and other factors.** Maylett and Warner (2014) point out that engagement may have a contagious effect on other workers. Once started, workers may feed off of one another’s emotional connection to work.

1 **Supervisor's recognition.** By far the strongest external reinforcement comes from one’s immediate supervisor. Regular pats on the back often turn a moderate performer into a champion. Recognition from managers up the channel also contributes this way. Although regular pats on the back are often few and far between, personal work engagement can be maximized by regularly tracking the compliments in a journal and then reflecting
upon them as part of an overall program. Of course, there are many supervisors who are stingy with compliments to anyone and there is simply no way to change their behavior. But one can sometimes look to other supervisors’ feedback to fill the void.

This methodology implicitly expands on Gallup’s notion of passionately performing everyday duties, defining personal work engagement as the emotional connection the worker has with the organization as mediated through the labor he/she provides daily. This is manifested in the manner in which the worker approaches his/her daily tasks, which includes the physiological, cognitive and behavioral states.

**Findings**

In assessing personal work engagement, we used the Workplace Outcome Suite (WOS), a set of outcome measures that employee assistance programs (EAPs) use to test the efficacy of their programs in a pre-treatment/post-treatment design. The standard version of the WOS included a work engagement scale based on a literature review of the measures currently being used in published research. The five basic WOS measures as shown in Table 1 are: absenteeism; presenteeism; work engagement; life satisfaction; and workplace distress — workplace outcomes related to productivity. Although these measures were not used to assess personal-based change, the items themselves look much like personal-based scales used in psychology. The only difference is that they were measures designed to survey the organization, not the worker.

In developing the WOS Work Engagement Scale, we examined the types of items used in the prevailing measures and then constructed our own based on a formal latent variable measurement model (Bollen and Lennox 1991).

We tested the sensitivity of the WOS scale by conducting pre-treatment/post-treatment comparisons of scores in a 90-day follow-up study of call-center-based EAP counseling for several Fortune 500 companies.

Our initial findings support the notion that work engagement is best considered an individual differences variable, similar to a personality trait or an attitude that can be changed with some form of personal or organizational intervention. In our view, it is not a clinical variable and thus outside the purview of medical or psychological treatment. But we also view it as something more than an attitude that is subject to random movement over time. It is best considered a soft skill that people acquire and perfect given sufficient time, focus and practice.

**Personal Work Engagement: The Way Forward**

Organizations can communicate the value of taking ownership of their personal work

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**Table 1 | Pooled Results Using 9 Common items in the WOS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WOS Score</th>
<th>Pre-test</th>
<th></th>
<th>Post-test</th>
<th></th>
<th>N</th>
<th>2-tailed Statistical Significance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>Standard Deviation</td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>Standard Deviation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Absenteeism*</td>
<td>12.6</td>
<td>27.7</td>
<td>6.8</td>
<td>25.0</td>
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<td>.000</td>
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<tr>
<td>Presenteeism</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>1.3</td>
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<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work Engagement</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>2867</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life Satisfaction</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>2869</td>
<td>.000</td>
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<tr>
<td>Workplace Distress</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>2868</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: Wilcoxon signed rank test was used to test the significance of the reduction in missed hours of work. Some studies used the 25-item version and some used the 9-item version. This analysis is based on the nine items that were present in all samples.
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engagement and provide their employees with the methods and tools to actively manage the level of engagement in the long and short term.

Using a specialized survey/assessment tool such as the WOS (configured to assess personal work engagement), organizations can provide their employees with a framework to review their work experiences and reflect on the positive reinforcement they have received in each area: personal meaning; financial compensation; family appreciation; co-worker support; professional accolades; and supervisors’ recognition. Specialized interactive curricula can be developed to take employees through exercises to prompt recall of reinforcing instances. Such curricula can also be used to assess and improve task engagement, alertness and attentiveness, as well as life-skill training in dealing with self-doubt, coping with procrastination, goal setting, managing negativity bias, realizing the power of focus and dealing with negative co-workers.

Although some of the reinforcing factors, such as professional accolades, do not apply across a wide range of jobs and industries, most of the others do. The focus of maintaining high personal engagement is to carefully consider each one no matter how limited the application. However, in the end, it is up to the employee to focus on the factors he/she decides are the most important. By combining the motivation for attaining an optimal level of work engagement and a method for monitoring their task engagement on a moment-to-moment basis, workers can develop the skills to optimize personal work engagement in their current assignment and, as they progress through their career, beyond their current employer.

The first step to improving employee engagement, which has remained stubbornly static since 2000, is to get a clearer understanding of the psychological wellsprings of each employee and establish/implement a validated standard that all organizations can use to reliably gauge meaningful engagement. Prevailing approaches rely on organizational change that is supposed to trickle down to the individual employee. This approach ignores the employee’s role in creating change at the personal level. Only when we shift the focus to personal work engagement — and provide each employee with the appropriate resources, direction and incentives — will we see a more fully invested workforce.

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