Employee engagement
All you need to know about employee engagement

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Introduction
What is employee engagement?

It is easy to get employee engagement confused with employee happiness or satisfaction. An employee may be happy at work, but that doesn’t mean that they are working productively or feel passionate about the organisation and its goals. An employee might be satisfied, showing up for work and doing the job without any complaints, but that doesn’t mean that they would ever go the extra mile when required, or bother to complete those small tasks if they think no one will notice. Happy or satisfied aren’t enough. Engaged employees really care about the company and its vision and they have an emotional commitment to their work and the company, which means that they will work on behalf of the organisation’s goals and not just for the next pay date or promotion (Forbes).

At Thomas International, we define employee engagement as a positive experience resulting from the relationships you have, the role you do and the rewards you get in the workplace.

The concept of engagement has been discussed extensively by both psychologists and HR/L&D practitioners for the best part of 25 years; developing from a purely role-focused model to new models incorporating the psychological and social contexts of the workplace.
The history of engagement theories and models

1990
The work-role model of engagement (Kahn, 1990)
People are engaged at work when they feel their work is meaningful, they feel secure in their work environment and they have the resources required to do their job.

1997
Engagement as the opposite of burnout (Maslach & Leiter, 1997)
Being engaged represents the positive psychological opposite of burnout.

2003
Engagement as psychological well-being (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2003)
Being engaged is a positive psychological state when a person feels energized at work, is absorbed in what they do and is dedicated to their job role.

2009
The psycho-social model of engagement (Slaski & Cowan 2009)*
People are engaged at work as the result of a positive psychological and social work environment, based on their work relationships, their role and the rewards they receive.

*published by Thomas International as Thomas Engage © 2015
What does an engaged employee look like?

- Displays a positive attitude and behaviour
- Takes pride in their work
- Loyal to the organisation
- A great advocate of the organisation to clients
- Willing to go the extra mile
- They feel heard and empowered to share ideas
- They understand the business vision and goals
- They know what is expected of them in their role
- They harness good working relationships
- Looks for opportunities to learn and grow

Engaged employees are more productive, drive the bottom line and inspire company innovation.
Low engagement is a strategic risk

Products, services, processes and strategies can all contribute to superior performance making your organisation more successful than others, but they can all be copied over time. The one thing that creates sustainable competitive advantage is your workforce. This is why low engagement is so damaging.

The risks of low engagement to the UK economy became a key focus for business leaders and government as we approached the late-2008 financial crisis and the recession years that followed.

The Secretary of State for Business in 2008 commissioned a report examining the benefits of employee engagement for business. In 2009 MacLeod & Clarke submitted their findings as a government whitepaper titled ‘Engaging for Success: enhancing performance through employee engagement’. The 2009 report recommended increasing employee engagement to safeguard the UK Economy from the challenges presented by the recession and increased global competition.

Increasing employee engagement should be a strategic priority for businesses. Higher engagement has been consistently shown to relate to positive individual and organisational outcomes:

- Engagement has been associated with many positive business outcomes, including but not limited to: reduced turnover, increased client satisfaction, employee commitment and business productivity (Harter; Schmidt & Hayes, 2002).

- The ‘Kelly Global Workforce Index’ (2013) revealed that organisations with engagement scores in the top 25% demonstrate attrition rates, on average, 40% lower than those organisations with engagement scores in the bottom 25%.

- According to the independent Employee Engagement Task Force (Engage for Success), backed by the government department of Business Innovations and Skills:
  - Only a third of UK employees say they are actively engaged at work
  - 20 million workers are not delivering their full capability/realising their potential at work
  - UK productivity is 20% lower than the rest of the G7 (Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, UK, US)
High engagement is a competitive advantage

Engagement can improve productivity and effectiveness at work because engaged employees enjoy their work, feel driven to perform and are more likely to proactively change how they approach their work. In short, highly engaged people are more innovative in the workplace.

The National Endowment of Science, Technology and the Arts (NESTA) published the ‘Everyday Innovation’ report in December 2009, providing recommendations for businesses keen to increase innovation in their organisation. In short, organisations need their employees to feel positive at work and ensure there is a supportive management structure in place to foster innovation.

A Chartered Management Institute report by Patterson & Kerrin, 2009 demonstrated that engagement is linked to the improved success of innovation initiatives at work. Highly engaged individuals are likely to ‘job craft’, this involves making small efficiency changes to the way someone completes their work. Although small, cumulatively these innovations can greatly support the productivity of an organisation (Bakker, Albrecht and Leiter, 2011).
Factors affecting employee engagement

Every organisation’s success is built upon the foundation of its people. Get this part right and you are likely to have a motivated and productive workforce and a more successful business. Get it wrong and you will be faced with low morale, poor levels of motivation and productivity, and higher levels of absence and employee turnover.

The Thomas Engage model breaks down employee engagement into seven key factors for success:

What do employees need from the organisation to be engaged?
The development of Thomas ‘Engage’

1. Developed by Prof. Mark Slaski, University of Hertfordshire (2009).

2. Grounded in the psychosocial theory of workplace engagement.

3. Focus groups conducted with public and private organisations re: positive & negative aspects of work.

4. A 28-item questionnaire created to measure seven areas of engagement.

5. Questionnaire provided to 2,500+ individuals for psychometric analysis.

6. Statistical factor analysis confirmed the seven areas of engagement.

7. Engage has strong positive correlations with the UWES (Utrecht Work Engagement Scale) demonstrating construct validity.

8. From this research, Engage showed criterion validity, predicting the following outcomes:
   - Employee morale
   - Organisational belonging
   - Workplace distress

We asked Mark Slaski, Engage Developer:
“What do you view as the single biggest factor blocking businesses from increasing employee engagement?”

A: The challenge for businesses today is firstly to measure the right things i.e. the psychological factors and drivers that will actually lead to actions and improvements; and secondly, to realise that high engagement is enhanced by the daily behaviour of managers and specifically how they make the most of every interaction and conversation to inspire their people.
How do you measure engagement?

Measuring engagement can be complex as it is made up of a number of different drivers, each contributing to the overall level of engagement, including the relationships employees have in the workplace, the role that they do and the rewards they receive.

Running a health check for your organisation can help you to establish the current levels of engagement within the workforce and identify actions for making any necessary improvements.

The Thomas Engage model can help you to identify the following factors:

- Strengths
- Vulnerabilities
- Levels of engagement by group
- A benchmark against other UK organisations
- Actions to address vulnerabilities
- Your organisational well-being factor
- Management styles operating within your organisation

One of the biggest barriers to getting the best results from an employee engagement programme is regarding it as a ‘tick-box’ exercise and doing little or nothing with the results. Sending out your survey and then presuming that you’ve successfully addressed your employee’s engagement could be counterproductive and more damaging than doing nothing at all. Be prepared to action a meaningful follow up on the results. The Thomas Engage report provides you with accessible and practical guidelines that can form the basis of your next steps to improving engagement in your organisation. The report also provides recommendations specifically for leadership and organisational change.

The process should form a regular part of your employee engagement programme, allowing you to measure the effect of the changes you make over time and any fluctuations in engagement.
There is a famous quote by former Campbell’s Soup CEO, Doug Conant, who once said, “To win in the marketplace you must first win in the workplace.”

There is no doubt that employee engagement is the key to a high performing workforce. For your employees, it’s about getting up in the morning and thinking, “I’m looking forward to getting to work. I know what I need to do today and I’ve got some excellent ideas about how to do it well. I can’t wait to see my colleagues and I’m looking forward to helping them have a good day too.”

As a leader, employee engagement is about helping your employees to feel pride in their work and loyalty to their team, manager and organisation. It is about positive attitudes and behaviours from everyone at every level and layer of the organisation from the top down.

Remember these three key takeaways to get you in the right mind-set to embark on your employee engagement journey to success:

1. **Employee engagement can be measured quickly and accurately**
2. **Low engagement is a strategic risk, high engagement is a competitive advantage**
3. **High engagement increases the success rate of organisational innovation processes**