

Facets of Employee Engagement & Disengagement: A Conceptual Analysis

Dr. Suneet Walia
Assistant Professor
B.A., LLb, MBA
Department of Business Management,
Dr. Harisingh Gour Vishwavidyalaya, Sagar

Abstract

Employee engagement has become a quest for the HR in the present era. Human employees are dynamic in nature with varied aspirations. One comes to a standstill in regards to creating an unbreakable bond between the individual employee and his/her organization. Does this bond is held by lucrative packages of compensation, motivations & channelizing employee behaviour or do we require creating an emotional bond and influence our employees psychologically. It is imperative for an HR Professional to understand the intricacies of establishing and maintaining the employee's levels of engagement with his/her organization.

This research article explores various facets of employee engagement and disengagement, along with its impact upon employees in their working environment. The causes of disengagement and understanding engagement gap are also discussed. The author has endeavored to construct an engagement model keeping in mind the various influencing facets of employee engagement which shall help to establish and strengthen the engagement levels of employees with their organizations.

Key Words: Employee, Engagement, motivation, rewards, Job Security, Leadership.

Introduction:

The word engagement is an old French word 'entgage', meaning "to pledge oneself". Thus pledging ushers commitment which in turn, brings forth loyalty & dedication towards their work & organization (Marciano, 2010). Engagement is also viewed as an "attitude of mind, a set of positive attitude, emotions & behavior enabling high job performance of a kind that is in tune with the organization's mission" (Holbeche et.al, 2012).

It was in 1990, that the psychologist William Kahn coined the term employee engagement for the first time. His definition of employee engagement is, “the harnessing of organization members selves to their work roles; in engagement, people employ and express themselves physically, cognitively, and emotionally during role performance” (Carnahan, 2013). In many research articles, engagement is defined as a kind of emotional commitment by an employee towards his job, consisting of many factors such as employee motivation, job satisfaction, involvement, commitment, and affected by psychological contract (Gupta & Sharma, 2016). Some researchers have made psychological contract as the basis of employee engagement, which lines the relationship between the organizational factors and work outcome, such as commitment and job satisfaction (Guest & Conway, 1997; Marks & Scholarios, 2004; Holbeche et.al, 2012). Thus it was observed that psychological contract breach brings out negative behavior from employees such as withdrawal from work, employing less efforts to their tasks, increase in emotional exhaustions and display low job satisfaction (Holbeche et.al, 2012). Further Kahn (1990) explained engagement by dividing it as ‘personal engagement’ and ‘personal disengagement’. Present world gives a competitive work environment where organizations expect its employees to go an extra mile. On the other hand, employees aspire to fulfill their ambitions of life through working & expecting support & recognition from the employer. The Gallup Corporation in 2004 found critical links between business growth, customer loyalty, and profitability and employee engagement. Ditchburn (2012), stated that “employing an engaged work force can help put a business ahead of their competitors” (carnahan, 2013). Moreover in his research Carnahan (2013) mentions that “the more hours an employee spends at work the greater the need for that employee to experience work engagement”.

Facets of Employee engagement:

The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) Report (Alfes, et.al., 2010), states, “that employee engagement is considered to have three core facets: Intellectual engagement---thinking intensively about the job and continuous improvement in it; Affective engagement---feeling positive about their job; Social Engagement---ready to take opportunities to discuss the matters of improvement in work with others, (Gupta & Sharma, 2016). Thus it can be concluded that “engagement is a two way process”, and organization needs to endeavor more to ensure that all the employees feel to voluntarily & willingly contribute their discretionary effort to achieve

organizational goals up keeping the organizational values. Further the engaged employees are able to enhance “their own sense of well being”, (Gupta & Sharma, 2016).

Every job has its own physical & mental challenges which impacts the tasks, performances and productivity which in turns discloses the level of engagement of an employee. Jobs also generate emotions of personal involvement, satisfaction, happiness for the work and the burnout from doing the work responsibilities. Burnout is considered to be opposite of engagement (carnahan, 2013). Burnout inflicts the emotions of overload of responsibilities which most of the time goes unrewarded and employees often feel a loss of control over their own work.

Kahn, (1990) explained engagement by dividing it as ‘personal engagement’ and ‘personal disengagement’ (carnahan, 2013). He further defined “personal engagement describes employees as those individuals who have fully occupied themselves physically, intellectually and emotionally at work”. Personal disengagement is explained as “employees who have uncoupled themselves, or withdrawn from their role in the work place” (Vance, 2008; Carnahan, 2013). Shuck and Wollard (2010) have defined the term employee engagement as “an individual employee’s cognitive, emotional, and behavioral state directed toward desired organizational outcomes” (p. 103) (Wollard & Shuck, 2011). They gave a distinct engagement factors related to individuals and organization. According to Wollard & Shuck, (2011), it is the individual psychological factors that impact the engaged and disengaged aspect of employees “suggesting that employees who are capable of finding motivation within their job and organization, and who focus and direct their energies toward positive organizational outcomes, may be most likely to be engaged”.

As per Gallup (2012), there are three levels of employee engagement: Engaged, Not Engaged and Actively Disengaged. Employees who are said to be engaged are found with passion and they have a ‘profound connection’ with their work place (Carnahan, 2013), having an innovation drive to take their organization ahead. Not engaged employees found to be disconnected psychologically from their work, however they can be productive. The actively disengaged employees are said to be “physically present, but psychologically absent”, (Vazirani, 2007; Carnahan, 2013).

Engagement also has multiple drivers that stimulate employee engagement. The drivers are classified into two main category, first is functional and the second is emotional. Functional drivers are said to be objective in nature and are easily measurable; rewards, benefits and bonuses are its examples. On the other hand, emotional drivers include the psychosocial factors that affect the reactions of individuals. Gupta & Sharma, (2016), gave certain constructs of employee engagement such as: organizational commitment, organizational citizenship behavior, job involvement and flow, attitude or behavior and job satisfaction.

May, Gilson and Harter (2004), opine that engagement is associated with antecedents of Job involvement (Brown, 1996; Gupta & Sharma, 2016).

Gupta & Sharma, (2016), highlighted in their research that it is the ‘feeling of being valued’ by organization in an employee in terms of decision making, autonomy, opportunities to grow, organizations concern for its employees health and well being (Robinson et al., 2004, Gupta & Sharma, 2016), strengthens the engagement between employee and the organization.

As per Aon Hewitt’s (2013) report, an important driver that impacts the engagement levels is the ‘Career Opportunities’ available for employees (Gupta & Sharma, 2016). In addition to career opportunities, reputation, communications, managing performance, pay, innovation, brand alignment, career aspiration are the top engagement drivers (Gupta & Sharma, 2016). “A highly engaged employee consistently tries to contribute towards the organization beyond expectations” (Harter et al., 2002; Gupta & Sharma, 2016).

Engagement & Changing Behavior:

Jim Ryun puts, “Motivation is what gets you started; habits are what keeps you going” (Marciano, 2010). It can be put forth that motivation alone does not create a magical & efficient human capital, as individuals have varied motivation aspirations; and all rewards & recognition program’ s cannot allure employees to go an extra mile. In generic point of view it is said that the “habits are persistent & resistant to change, & they don’t go away just because we feel suddenly motivated” (Marciano, 2010). As per Maslow’s Need Hierarchy model, employees adhere to individual working than team working, when there is job insecurity, to get full credit of their jobs & work. In today’s corporate scenario people have adopted individualistic attitude towards work & so they curb

sharing of information or display lesser cooperative behavior unless “their perceived value” to the organization appears to be increasing (Marciano, 2010).

However, motivation is said to be more a short term influence which aspects an individual’s personal aspirations, and engaged employee is said to be more committed towards organizational objectives & works towards achieving it regardless of any rewards or awards. “Engaged employees are hardy; motivated employees are opportunistic, (Marciano, 2010). Marciano, (2010), in his book clearly states that engagement is different from motivation and that he gives the perspective of employee having a feeling of being “business owner” to be highly engaged.

The Operant condition theory by B.F. Skinner supports the change in behavior with components such as positive reinforcement, negative reinforcement and punishment. Marciano, (2010) states that “people are complex beings filled with thoughts, feelings, attitudes, personalities, skills, experiences & goals whose work is typically complex & requires higher-order cognitive skills including problem solving and decision making”.

Similarly the Social Exchange Theory (SET), states reasons of engagement and disengagement. It shows that when organizations provide appropriate support in terms of resources to its employees, they feel an obligation towards their employer and in turn display a higher level of engagement; and when employees feel the required resources are lacking they then disengage from their responsibilities (Koskey & Sakataka, 2015).

In 1990’s, it was Richard D’ Aveni who coined the phrase ‘hyper-competition’, to describe the competitive dynamics of the business world (D’Aveni, 1994; Holbeche & Matthew, 2012). Holbeche & Matthew, (2012), states that “for every organization in every sector, speed innovation, & agility are becoming the key capabilities for survival & sustainable performance”. They further state that “it is the engaged employees----who are aligned with organizational goals, willing to ‘go an extra mile’ and act as advocates of their organization ---who are most critical to business success”

Rewards & Employee Engagement:

Rewards or recognition can be classified as fixed and variable, intrinsic or extrinsic, for which an individual strives by giving his own skills and knowledge. Thus rewards are something that an employee works hard for.

Major components of rewards include salary, additional benefits, giving a healthy work environment, and employee development (Armstrong, 2006; Koskey & Sakataka, 2015).

An individual employee has options to work in any organization of his choice offering similar pay packages. Thus characteristics such as opportunities in career growth, earning respect and personal development, or a comparative higher pay package differentiates one organization from the other (King, 2020). The survey report, *Inside the Employee Mindset*, highlights the survey done by Aon Hewitt of more than 2500 employees working at the large and mid size organizations, that 60 percent of employees who stated that their reward package were high as compared to the other organizations, were found to be engaged employees (Miller, 2015). Mutunga (2009), in his research in telecommunication industry in Kenya, stated that among various factors increasing employee engagement among employees, “salary & benefits” was the biggest contributing factor (Koskey & Sakataka, 2015). Similarly (Scott, McMullen, and Royal, 2010), in their research work, indicate that a good ‘reward program’ has a positive influence on employee engagement.

Researchers have stated that money serves as a major motivating factor and in a way impacts employee performance (Marciano, 2010). Few employees base their dedication on the basis of their compensation. Marciano, (2010), states that when a small amount of extra money makes significant differences in an individual’s life or when an employee feels that he is undercompensated in relative comparison to the time & effect or to a colleague & market value, there is a change in engagement levels.

The Engagement Gap:

Holbeche et.al, (2012), states reasons for lower engagement among the employees are as follows:

1. **Insecurity:** Employees who have the sense of insecurity or who’s security needs (Maslows Need hierarchy) do not seem to be fulfilled are the one’s who display low engagement.
2. **Company Reputation:** Prof Nigel Nicholson, (2011) states “peoples commitment to an organization is provisional and based on engagement; they no longer automatically wear the company badge with pride”, (Holbeche et.al, 2012). Thus it is observed that if an organization has a good image, employees tend to

cling to it and talks good about them. However, if the reputation is bad employees hesitate to disclose their association with the company.

3. **Loss of Job satisfaction:** It is generally stated that employees focus on their self interest and when this self interest is not catered they tend to disengage themselves. “Employees self interest can rebound against employers: if their future is in doubt in their own organization and there is less incentive for employees to offer their best”.

Reasons for Disengagement:

Kahn (1990) defined personal disengagement as “Personal disengagement... is the simultaneous withdrawal and defense of a person’s preferred self in behaviors that promote a lack of connections, physical, cognitive, and emotional absence, and passive, incomplete role performance” (Govindarajo, Mohanchandran & Ramalu, 2014). Branham (2005) stated that a disengaged worker could bring destruction to the morale and profits of the organization. Mostly it is these workers who are found to be complaining more than actual working, creating problems for peers and seniors, behave rudely with customers and bring in losses (Vajda & SpiritHeart, 2008; Govindarajo, Mohanchandran & Ramalu, 2014). One of the main reasons of disengagement is the type of leadership given to the employees; “by assessing leaders, companies can identify potential issues, and gain a deeper understanding of what’s really happening in a department or team” (Hedger, 2012).

Several researches have stated that the major reasons of employee disengagement are job insecurities, government policies, shareholders pressures, ‘unanticipated job offers, lack of trust on management policies, unsafe work environment, perceived organizational inequities in terms of treatment, pay, and performance appraisals (Kahn, 1990; Branham, 2005; Pech and Slade, 2006; Govindarajo, Mohanchandran & Ramalu, 2014). Moreover organizations unethical practices, unsolved grievance, prejudiced culture norms inappropriate leadership style adds fuel to the fire. Such insecurities and unsafe working causes stress, anxiety, bad behaviors absenteeism and competency issues, all leading to disengagement from their responsibilities (Govindarajo, Mohanchandran & Ramalu, 2014).

Burnout is regarded as another prominent factor that brings forth disengagement in employees. Burnout is defined as “a response, drawn out in time, to chronic interpersonal stressors in the workplace (Maroco & Campos, 2012; Rastogi, Pati, Krishnan, & Krishnan, 2018). As the OLBI (Oldenburg Burnout Inventory) held that hostile working conditions prevailing for a long time leads to exhaustion and disengagement from one’s responsibilities (Demerouti et al., 2001; Rastogi, et al., 2018).

A Contended employee is an engaged employee? “Apathy is the hall mark of disengaged employee whose mantra is ‘I don’t care’” (Marciano, 2010). Further Marciano, (2010), highlights characteristics of disengaged employees, such as they have no pride for their work, they aim to work less & get fully paid. They indulge into undue criticism of supervisors & colleagues. Factors that cause disengagement are as follows:

As per Carnahan (2013) research, the reasons for an employee to leave their current position:

- lack of respect or lack of support from supervisors
- Incongruent compensation package
- lack of interesting or challenging job duties
- lack of inspirational leadership
- bad work hours
- unavoidable reasons
- bad employee relations
- Favoritism by supervisor
- Lack of recognition for contributions

Repercussions of Disengagement:

Disengagement refers to “a lack of commitment, interest and enthusiasm to work or a workplace” (Allam, 2017). Schaufeli and Bakker (2004) have stated in their work that disengagement is said to be “a negative, unfulfilling, work-related state of mind that is characterized by weaker, infidelity and disloyalty” (Allam, 2017).

Disengaged employees are less spirited in fulfilling their responsibilities and do not wish to do auxiliary endeavors for completion of tasks. Moreover they are found to be disinterested and are non curious about their working environment or their own position in their organization (Wellins and Concelman; Govindarajo, Mohanchandran & Ramalu, 2014).

Employees who are found to be not so happy and keep brooding about the negative aspects of their job and in consequence of it destroy the zeal of peers and subordinates (Gallup, 2006; (Govindarajo, Mohanchandran & Ramalu, 2014).

Employee disengagement in the US costs the economy \$370bn a year. Disengaged employees costs organizations \$3,400 a year for every \$10,000 in salary. Turnover, which often follows long-term disengagement, costs organizations between 48% and 61% of an employee’s annual salary, (Lawrence, 2016). In generic terms disengagement is said to take a measurement of employee’s motivation, involvement and commitment (Datamatics, 2020).

“Disengaged employees do not advocate their company as a place to work and less often recommend their company’s products or services (Baumruk, 2004). They are less innovative and creative, and do not tend to share new ideas with co-workers (Krueger & Killham, 2007). Saks, (2006), stated that disengaged employees often are not satisfied, not committed, and have an intention to leave their organization” (Govindarajo, Mohanchandran & Ramalu, 2014). Pech and Slade (2006), highlighted that low Morale, lack of energy or attachment towards the organization and frequent mistakes without regrets are all the symptoms of employee disengagement (Govindarajo, Mohanchandran & Ramalu, 2014), which harm the longevity of the organizations revenue.

Right way to Engaging:

Employees are said to be engaged when they are found to be enthusiastic about their tasks and responsibilities and are totally immersed to complete their work in order to achieve organizational objectives (Ayer, 2015). Mercer, (2011), has given three broad categories of employees and their response to a given situation: (Holbeche et.al, 2012). **Assertive:** they have a positive feeling towards their employer, although their own self interest is a priority. Thus they go an extra mile for organization and provide discretionary effort. **Passives:** such employee's struggles to go an extra mile feel like victims and are indifferent toward their work or organization. **Good citizens:** such employees keep down their own interest. They are loyal and have a good feeling towards their employer.

According to many researches it is found that in many corporate only few percent of employees are found to be engaged and majority are disengaged. Moreover it is also found that there has been a decline in the employee engagement and most employees working are disengaged (Truss et.al, 2006; Bates, 2004; Holbeche et.al, 2012).

Thus a pertinent question lies that what is the right way to create employee engagement? As per the above discussion we can understand the engagement is a subjective concept which differs from employee to employee. The corporate can chalk out an employee engagement Model within their working environment.

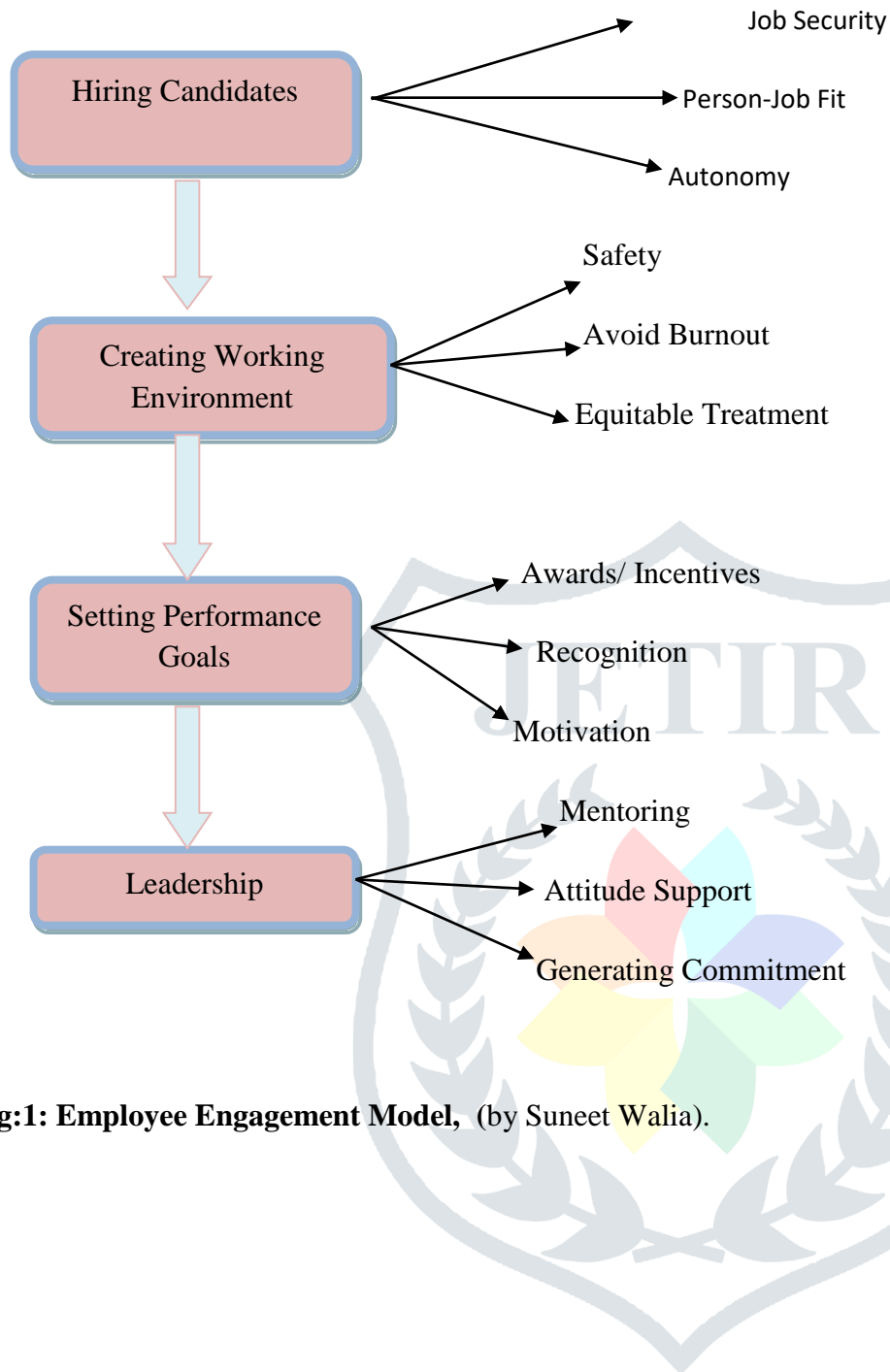


Fig:1: Employee Engagement Model, (by Suneet Walia).

The above model has been designed keeping in view the various facets of enhancing and maintaining employee engagement. The first step of engagement begins at the time of hiring of employees. The assurance of job security, placing right person at the right job i.e by achieving the Job-Fit, and giving a sense of autonomy while at work, must be duly structured. Bhuian and Islam (1996) is of the opinion that employees willfully strive harder and achieve organizational objectives when they have a sense that their job is secured for longer period of time (Ahmed, et.al, 2017). Rousseau and McLean (1993) have claimed that securing job security is a pre condition to achieving employee engagement (Ahmed, et.al, 2017). Parker & Wall (1998) stated that when employees have a good amount of autonomy they not only become more responsible for the problems arising in work process, but

also strive to attain new required skills to perform better (Akram & Hassan, 2013). Lewin, (1952, p. 239), had a field theory which explains that when employees perceive their work environment positively, they tend to display positive behaviours such as engagement (Bui, Zeng & Higgs, 2017).

Secondly, creation of a safe work place removes many apprehensions from employee's minds. Responsibilities must be allocated in such a manner that the feeling of burnout with such work tasks has no place at all. Human psyche has always a comparative nature, especially with their peers in their organization. Thus equality is browsed not only in salary or behavior, but also in growth opportunities as well. Demerouti, Bakker, de Jonge, Janssen and Schaufeli (2001) research states that extreme work pressures result in health deteriorations and emotional weariness leading to symptoms like burnout (Kumar & Sia, 2012). May et al., (2004), says that employees disengage if they experience ambiguity in Role structures and the work environment is 'threatening', (Kumar & Sia, 2012).

Thirdly, when setting performance standards or goals, the management must set up an appealing reward system for which an employee is encouraged to go an extra mile to complete his/her task. However, for some employee's money or incentives may not prove to be the actual motivating factor(s). Instead they feel happy more when their hard work and talents are appreciated and duly recognized. Saks and Rotman (2006) are of the view that rewards and recognition are prominent influencing factors of engagement of employees (Anitha, 2014). Kahn (1990), explains that each employee perceive their rewards and recognition in their own individual way and so it is imperative for the organizations to chalk out an acceptable standards of compensation and recognition for their employee (Anitha, 2014). Thus right motivation factors must be recognized on an individual basis and accordingly provided.

Fourthly, a sound leadership must be bestowed upon the employees. Leaders must act as mentors rather than bosses. Wallace and Trinko (2009), research studies state that "engagement occurs naturally when leaders are inspiring" (Anitha, 2014). Each individual coming from a different education and social background has an individual perspective in perceiving work situations and interpersonal interaction. Thus it becomes the responsibility of leaders or supervisors to manage the attitudes and behavior of individual employees and avoid conflicting situations to emerge. Moreover the leadership must provide the sense of trust and ensure an amicable

work climate so that employees themselves feel obligated to do their work honestly and achieve organizational objectives and remain loyal towards their organization.

As per Joshi and Sodhi (2011), there are six management functions that have a major impact on 'Executive' engagement, namely, autonomy, monetary benefits, work-life balance, employee relations, career growth opportunities and team working (Anitha, 2014).

From the above discussion it can be concluded that there is not one prominent factor that increases the engagement levels in an employee. As we know human beings are dynamic in nature and individual aspirations and motivations also differ from each other. The concept of engagement is not only based on individual's personal and emotional discretions but is dependent upon how an organization creates an appropriate working environment beginning from the recruitment or selection of the employees. How he/she perceives his job environment and his own future in the organization strengthens or weakens the engagement bond between the employee and his organization. The organization has full scope to control and maintain the engagement bond between the employees and his/her organization.

"Employee engagement is characterized as a feeling of commitment, passion and energy that translates into high level of persistence with even most difficult task, exceeding expectations and taking the initiative", (Holbeche et.al, 2012). A Corporate Leadership Council (CLC) study found that companies with "highly engaged employees grow twice as fast as peer companies" (Holbeche et.al, 2012).

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