

Employee Engagement Strategies in the Post-Pandemic Workplace

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly altered workplace dynamics, driving a sudden shift to remote work and creating new challenges for employee engagement. This paper explores the evolving landscape of employee engagement in the post-pandemic era, examining the drivers, challenges, and effective strategies for fostering engagement in a hybrid work environment. Key components of successful engagement strategies are discussed, including employee voice, recognition, autonomy, growth opportunities, peer relationships, and communication. Through a review of current research and case studies, this paper provides insights and practical recommendations for organizations aiming to enhance employee engagement and maintain a competitive edge in the post-pandemic workplace.

Keywords: Employee Engagement, Post-Pandemic Workplace, Remote Work, Hybrid Work, Employee Well-being

INTRODUCTION

The unpredicted COVID-19 pandemic rocked the world in many ways, and can be credited for forcing businesses to change. With the sudden shift to remote work and a lot of uncertainty during the start of the pandemic, companies focused on the urgent to survive and remain relevant. The pandemic proved that work could be done differently and resulted in a shift. It quickly users in a new era of work as businesses began to rethink the nature of work and how employees engaged. COVID-19 changed employee priorities and took a toll on employee's mental health. A growing sense of disconnection between employees and their organizations in this era of virtual work has widened the expectation gap from the start business of the pandemic. Employee engagement has become a topic of interest and concern for organizations everywhere. In fact, according to a PRECISE report, employee engagement emerged as the second biggest concern for CEOs in the year immediately following the pandemic. Organizations have begun to innovate and embrace ideas to engage their employees meaningfully once again, including a focus on new hybrid work models, connectivity and collaboration tools, employee wellbeing, inclusion and diversity, skills development, and much more [1, 2]. Engaging employees is a challenging mammoth task in today's world, especially in a hybrid work environment. Understanding the drivers of engagement becomes the foundation for organizations to embark on a transformative journey [3, 4].

UNDERSTANDING EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT

Employee engagement is a term used to describe the amount of energy and ownership an employee devotes to their job on a physical, cognitive, and emotional level. It includes intense efforts to meet job expectations, as well as an emotional connection to the company's reputation and outlook. Engaged employees are committed to both the success of the company and to their own success. These employees are difficult to replace because they put in the energy on a daily basis to go above and beyond to meet the company's needs. The other classifications of employees within the organization are Not Engaged Employees and Disengaged Employees. Not Engaged Employees focus on tasks rather than goals. They put in the minimum effort needed to do their job in order to get a paycheck but have little care about the company's future. Disengaged Employees are not happy at their job. They have mentally checked out and

do not put any effort into their work actively working against the company's best interests. These employees hurt the company's culture and promote their unhappiness to their fellow coworkers [5].

Studies show that employee engagement levels significantly influence aspects of an organization, including customer satisfaction, recruitment, turnover rates, productivity, safety, innovation, teamwork, and commitment to company displays. Therefore, employee engagement is an important desire for organizations in order to maintain a competitive advantage. There are three groups that antecedents to employee engagement can be classified into: Meaningfulness, Safety, and Availability. In order for an employee to have meaning in their job, their work must meet the employee's personal needs and desires. Employees need to see that the significance of the input has on the overall outcome. If they can see the importance of their role, they will want to invest their time, energy, and strength-focused tasks beyond basic expectations. This positive feeling about their job leads to an emotional attachment to the company. A meaningful job also provides a sense of belonging, connection and worthiness in a social context. If an employee does not feel like they relate to their co-workers, then they will not put in extra effort to meet goals and will feel disconnected from their work [6].

DEFINITION AND IMPORTANCE

With the advancement in technology, job specifications have drastically changed creating the dilemma of how to keep employees focused and therefore engaged. Each employee plays an essential role in achieving the company's objective. Engagement is an innovative notion that is evolving globally. According to Deloitte, engagement is defined as an emotional commitment that an employee feels towards their organization. Hence, the employee gives their best in accomplishing the organizational task given to them. Employee engagement is more than just a work engagement, deeper trust and connection need to be bridged between the organization and the employee. Moreover, an engaged workforce is an important facilitator for a competitive business environment and for stable economic growth in this context. Nevertheless, it demands an effortful level of employee-consumer-resources input-output mechanism on a steady basis. Never-ending communication, leadership initiatives, periodic feedback, and collective camaraderie are some means that attain employee engagement [7]. As such, in a post-pandemic workplace setting, recurrent shifts in changes make participative leadership daunting. In the place of higher abundance to engagement, the prospect of deed engagement remains down which has negative ramifications for organizations, employees, and society. The development of contingent arrangements such as a flexible job in and out of the office is gradually unsuccessful. With fluctuating leadership support to employees in terms of empathy, well-being solicitation, socio-emotional conversation, or recognition of hard work, employees feel deserted and unrecognized [8].

FACTORS AFFECTING EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT

The rapid advancement of modern technologies has transformed the way that people work. The Covid-19 pandemic has expedited trends affecting where and how people work, including remote work, video conferencing, collaborations using digital work tools, performance monitoring using artificial intelligence (AI), the emergence of the digital labour market, and the perpetual containment of work. However, there are mixed feelings among employees about the impact of these changes. Employees in the private sector tend to perceive a more negative impact than their public sector counterparts; employees making use of more modern technologies and data-driven supervisory technologies express more negative feelings than others; and the young generation is particularly concerned about technostress (the feeling of being stressed about the use of modern technologies) [9]. It is more important than ever to understand the feelings of individual employees about the impact of newly developed and widely adopted changes in working environments on their ability to perform and maintain their well-being. Although the level of employee engagement differs by gender, it does not differ by age group and years of service. There is evidence to indicate that the work ability index of public institution employees is higher than that of private company employees. There is no statistically significant difference across employment types. The employee engagement index is above 3.6 out of 5 points, indicating that the level of employee engagement among employees is at a high level. The level of work ability is at a moderate level (66-84) [10].

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES IN THE POST-PANDEMIC WORKPLACE

The emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic created an unprecedented global health crisis. This forced organizations to rapidly adapt to changes across a variety of workplace contexts. Consequently, employees experienced a sudden shift to teleworking, creating a sense of uncertainty, isolation, and unpredictability amid an immediate health crisis. This unprecedented transition also necessitated different management strategies by organizations to ensure business continuity and employee well-being. In the aftermath of abrupt changes over the last three years, organizations needed to recognize and tackle the persistent and critical issues of having a hybrid work environment that emphasizes employee well-being

[11]. According to the latest statistics published by the Global Workforce Report, employment prospects are dim. Business activity is forecast to moderate sharply in the near term, with severe implications for employment around the world. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated many long-standing labor market challenges, including high levels of labor underutilization, especially for youth, and job quality concerns in developing economies. In the aftermath of such a global crisis, organizations needed to better understand how the pandemic had transformed employee experience and identify possible strategies to enhance employee engagement. The pandemic's impact on employee engagement strategies is explained, and such aspects are discussed in the context of post-pandemic issues [12].

KEY COMPONENTS OF EFFECTIVE EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT STRATEGIES

The world of work has transformed in unimaginable ways due to the contesting forces of globalisation and technology, but also the scourge of the COVID-19 pandemic. There are pressing needs to respond to these externally driven changes, and because of this, the employee voice should occupy an influential role in shaping decisions that impact their work. This is particularly relevant now as organisations transition to hybrid work arrangements. In many parts of the globe, workplaces are reopening and employers are asking employees to return to the office. This is being met with resistance from many employees and has resulted in high-profile disputes between employers and employees. Research has identified degrees of employee engagement, suggesting that actively disengaged employees present the greatest risk for organisations. Efforts to mitigate this risk and employee withdrawal require time, commitment and resources. However, organisations that engage their employees are more profitable, productive, and have higher satisfaction and retention rates. If an organisation's goal is to be an employer of choice and see the benefits that come with this, it must make it a strategic priority to foster a highly engaged workforce [13]. Successful employee engagement strategies are built on six essential elements. By building a strategy against this framework organisations can develop systems, processes, policies and practices that are critical to employee engagement and help them to successfully navigate the changes in the world of work that have occurred. These six essential elements are employee voice and representation throughout the organisation and a respectful response to this feedback; recognition of the employee contribution to the organisation's success with attention paid to non-monetary forms of recognition; increased employee autonomy and flexibility; employee growth and development; positive employee peer-to-peer relationships within work-groups, and strong and supportive communication between employees and management. The importance of these elements is illustrated with evidence from academic research and practice finally [14].

CASE STUDIES AND BEST PRACTICES

YaVonda Malia Ulfig identified strategies that leaders in a service company used to increase employee engagement in the post-pandemic workplace. The leader's practices that enhanced employee engagement included caring for employees personally, promoting career development, providing employees with relevant information, demonstrating trust in employees, recognizing achievement, treating employees equally, clearly communicating expectations, showing respect, considering employee perspectives during change, forming personal connections with employees, and planning social activities to bring employees together. Many of the practices that the leader uses to engage employees align with psychological theories and models of employee engagement, such as Kahn's model of personal engagement and the Job Characteristics Model. Also, the study identifies best practices that leaders in other organizations may wish to adopt to increase employee engagement in the post-pandemic workplace. The best practices include: (1) Training leaders to improve caring behaviors, such as asking employees about their families and activities outside of work; (2) Providing leaders with education on employee engagement to empower them to engage employees more effectively; (3) Creating opportunities for low-level employees to interact with upper management to foster personal connections; and (4) Encouraging leaders to dedicate time each week to organize social outings (such as lunch, dinner, or group outings) for all employees to develop camaraderie.

CONCLUSION

The post-pandemic workplace presents unique challenges and opportunities for employee engagement. Organizations must adapt to the new realities of hybrid work environments by focusing on key engagement drivers such as employee voice, recognition, autonomy, growth, peer relationships, and communication. Effective engagement strategies not only enhance productivity and job satisfaction but also contribute to overall organizational success. By prioritizing employee engagement, organizations can navigate the complexities of the post-pandemic era and build resilient, motivated, and committed workforces. The insights and best practices discussed in this paper offer a roadmap for leaders to foster a more connected and engaged workforce in the evolving world of work.

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