Absence Of A Universal Definition Of Employee Engagement

Employee Engagement

In recent years, there have been various questions raised regarding the definition of employee engagement. One of the challenges presented by employee engagement is the absence of a universal definition. Sanchez (2007) defines employee engagement as “an outcome of how employees perceive their work, leadership of their organizations, the recognition and rewards they receive, and the communication ethos of the organization.” Whereas, Kahn (1990) defines employee engagement as the “harnessing of organization members’ selves to their work roles; in engagement, people employ and express themselves psychically, cognitively and emotionally during role performances.”

CIPD (2018) recommends using a wider approach when it comes to implementing a holistic people strategy. CIPD compares Kahn’s definition with Utrecht University Group of occupational psychologists' definition. Although this focuses on the wider aspect of engagement, neither of the scholars take into account job roles and business objectives. However, definitions of employee engagement can be used to assist organizations to understand approaches to engagement. Macleod explains that there are four key enablers where a common theme for workforces can be identified. Engage for success (2019) has highlighted there should not be a ‘one size fits all approach to employee engagement.

It has been made evident that various definitions of engagement can be compared to other constructs, such as organizational commitment (Robinson, 2004) who has defined engagement as “one step up from commitment”. Saks (2006) supports Robinson’s argument in that organizational commitment also differs from engagement as it refers to a person’s attitude and attachment towards their organizations, whilst it could be argued that engagement is not merely an attitude; it is the degree to which an individual is attentive to their work and absorbed in the performance of their role.

Furthermore, according to May (2004) engagement is also associated with the constructs of job involvement. Kanungo (1982) describes job involvement as “a cognitive or belief of the state of psychological identification”. This differs from engagement in that it is concerned more with how the individual employs themselves during the performance of their job. Kanter (1982) explains participation in the decision-making process in the organization brings more positive outcomes than bureaucratic structure, as this involves knowledge sharing with management.

Meyer and Allen (1991) suggested there are different ways of being committed to an organization. They argue that there are three mindsets of organizational commitment. The effective mindset would demonstrate engagement within the organization but the others reflect a different commitment from the individual towards the organization and these mindsets may decrease engagement for the employee. For instance, Simmons (2013) addresses the importance for all employees to be better citizens in the workplace, regardless of their roles. Simmons states individuals should focus on their careers whilst also caring for others, these individuals are referred to as “givers”. “Givers” will shape the career of new employees who

join the organization and they will assist to direct and motivate others.

To demonstrate, at Future Biogas employees are treated as individuals and refer to the organization as a family. This is recognized by employees helping each other out regardless of their role or job description, as they committed to getting tasks completed to contribute to achieving the organizational goals and the growth of the business within the industry.

Furthermore, Thomson (2019) suggests Sodexo describes the discretionary effort as ‘going the extra mile and argues if your employee is committed to their organization, it is something they will demonstrate on a regular basis. Sodexo describes discretionary behavior as the difference between what an individual has to do and what they want to do in the workplace. Sodexo recognizes if an employee is representing discretionary effort by questioning the behaviors displayed by individuals.

An example of going the extra mile is at Future Biogas (FB). FB held a charity event for Red Nose Day, the event was held outside of working hours and involved a few hours of traveling time for some. However, FB witnessed employees displaying discretionary effort, as they volunteered to be involved, as they wanted to help the organization reach their target of fundraising. It was not compulsory for employees to attend and they were not being paid for this. Jones (2013) states “if people want to, rather than have or need to, magic happens” and this was exhibited through FB employees.

In relation to discretionary efforts made by employees, Hutchinson (2013) states the casual chain model reflects the performance of employees as there are various factors that need to be met to reach this goal. Hutchinson recognizes managers need to develop and influence employees’ abilities and increase their motivation for discretionary effort. Macleod & Clarke (2009) also suggest engaging managers, as one of the four enablers for employee engagement, managers need to focus on their people, provide them with the scope and treat them as individuals in order for them to display the wanted behaviors and commitment.

Moreover, there are various types of engagement within organizations; engaged, non-engaged and disengaged. Maslach (2018) states a full workforce of engaged employees will lead to high levels of energy. This means they will be motivated and focused on their work, allowing them to be high performers. However, this can lead to employees becoming burnt out and can lead to possible absences. The state of burnout addressed by Maslach eventually destroys the enthusiasm, spirit, and joy of individuals and can lead to exhaustion.

Another category of this concept is non-engagement. Non-engaged staff are required in every organization and often recognized as the employees who are committed to their role from 9 am to 5 pm and do not wish to go the extra mile. In comparison to this, another group of this concept is disengagement. McKeerver (2014) classifies a disengaged employee as a “silent killer”. This is due to the fact that you may not hear or see this employee, but they have a great impact on sabotaging other employees and the organization. From the evidence provided by the above scholars, it is evident that organizations require a balance of an engaged and non-engaged workforce to avoid a workplace of burnout and ill-health.

Employees can become disconnected from their organization when the psychological contract has not been fulfilled. The psychological contract refers to the unwritten expectations between the employer and employee. The concept was developed by Rosseau (1995) where she

explained the psychological contract includes informal arrangements, mutual beliefs, and common ground and perceptions between the two parties. The unofficial contract evolves based on communication between both parties. Breaches of the unofficial contract can damage the relationship between the parties, leading to reduced productivity, hostility, and disengagement.

Some of the aspects that are covered in a psychological contract may be job security, career prospects, training and development, fairness of pay and benefits, employers' reputation, and the impact they have on society. The legal, written contract of employment offers a limited representation of the human relationship between the employer and employees. Therefore, it can be considered that the psychological contract may be more powerful as it influences the behavior and actions of workers on a daily basis. Hutchinson (YEAR) explains the concept of the psychological contract is beneficial to our understanding of employer actions at work and also their understandings of human resources, allowing there to be two different views of psychological contracts.

Firstly, one view of the psychological contract is based on the work of Schein, who explains that the psychological contract is a set of unwritten reciprocal expectations between an individual and the organization. For example, promises made during the recruitment stage such as promotions, salary increases, recognition, and development. If this was mentioned at the start of the formation of the relationship then the employee will be expecting this.

Secondly, another view of this is Rousseu (1995) who argues that your own beliefs are shaped by the organization as an exchange. Each person has an individual contract with their employer. The relationship between the employee and employer can become strained as each employee is different and have different perceptions of what is expected dependent on what the employer has informed them of.

As each employee has different expectations from the organization, the concept of the psychological contract is very broad. Brinder (YEAR) explains that the psychological contract consists of conditional and implicit promises. Therefore, when the employee feels as though the promises in the psychological contract have not been adhered to, employees become disengaged from the organization. An example of being disengaged would be withdrawing from making an effort which could eventually lead to non-engagement. However, when employees feel as though their expectations are being met and the psychological contract has been fulfilled, they will be more willing to make more effort. Surveys have proven employees from large organizations stated they are unsure of who is responsible for making decisions affecting their welfare.

Patterns and trends of psychological contracts have been observed over time. For years, the traditional approach has focused on the promise of job security. Whereas, the modernist approach now focuses on learning and development whilst trying to ensure that individuals remain employable throughout their careers. Rousseau’s (1995) study examines the difference between North America and France. She explains there is more parties for the psychological contract in France compared to the USA as they have more representation from unions. Not only is creating the contract complicated due to multiple parties, but change is more complicated as it is hard to align them all.

Due to the psychological contract being individual, some people may want fluidity in their career and want to explore different fields of work, whereas others may still highly value job security.

Employee engagement has evolved due to various internal and external factors such as uncertain economic conditions i.e. Brexit, increase in technology facilitating production processes and shaping the demand for skills, flexible working, redundancies, and putting more pressure on employees. Due to the significance of these aspects, employers must focus on the key aspects of the employment deal they have with their staff in order to be able to retain the talent required. The psychological contract, therefore, offers a foundation for monitoring employees' attitudes which affect engagement.

In order to have a successful management team, there must be input into the organizational strategy as well as to design and implement the people management and development practices that support it. One area which can be focused on is the employer brand. Organizations should be clear on what they expect from the employee and also offer the employee. For instance, Newrest has created a set of values and a stated mission which is also known as an employee value proposition which employees will recognize.

Another area of focus is learning and development as employability is appealing for many workers so employees expect their organizations to offer opportunities for skills and career development. Moreover, management style and expectations are another area of focus as managers are no longer able to control the business top-down. Line managers are essential to understanding employee expectations. It should be made clear when they have a new recruit what they can expect from the job. This will increase the chances of establishing a realistic psychological contract.

HR practices have been able to develop along with employee demands over the years in order to ensure employees are happy in the workplace. One example of this is Future Biogas offers an employee assistance program. This is a confidential helpline that all employees can call at any time regarding any issues they may have such as debt or medical issues. Future Biogas also offers death and service, which offers four times an employee's salary to their family if they pass away. It can be argued that benefits do not make an employee engaged but employee value proposition does as it offers a more holistic view of the employees within the organization and what they want. Another way in which HR practices have been developed to meet the needs of employees is by holding an employee forum once a month. A representative from each department will come to the meeting and express any concerns they have to the management team. Similarly, Hewland Engineering has Think Smart forms, which is a suggestion box for the organization in ways that they can improve.

In conclusion, employee engagement is a fulfilling work-related state of mind which consists of energy, dedication, and concentration towards role performance. This concept is becoming popular in the workplace to retain quality employees. The study of employee engagement shows that employers need to develop stable engagement policies and HR practices in attaining a high level of engagement among employees.