



**Head  
Light**

# Why Don't Employee Engagement Surveys Work?

*part of our We think... series*

## **The Talent Cloud Platform**

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**Debbie Hance, Head of Business Psychology, suggests that lack of action after an engagement survey is at the root of the failure of engagement programmes. This article first appeared on HRZone - <http://www.hrzone.com/feature/people/why-dont-employee-engagement-surveys-work/143444>**

## Why don't employee engagement surveys work?

*'The fundamental element required for an organisation to thrive and grow is having employees who are committed, motivated and engaged'.*

That was the conclusion of the UK government's 2009 review on employee engagement<sup>[1]</sup>. This and other research studies - such as those by Gallup<sup>[2]</sup> and the Corporate Leadership Council<sup>[3]</sup> - champion the transformational possibilities of engagement and seduce us with the promise of increased productivity, improved financial performance, lower attrition and absenteeism and higher levels of customer satisfaction and innovation.

In the hopeful expectation of reaching this euphoric nirvana - where employees are more motivated, happier, more committed and more involved - many organisations have embarked on their own engagement journey ... only to flounder on the rocks of disappointment.

**Clearly, there's a difference between pursuing engagement and actually achieving it.**

If you make an effort to address engagement and get no reward for it, that's bad enough but there's a cruel irony here that creates a far bigger problem. The 'curse' of employee engagement is that the process of trying to achieve something positive and beneficial for your employees can actually end up disengaging them. In other words, you can create exactly the opposite of what you intended.

This is because organisations ask questions in their engagement surveys about how employees feel about their work. Answering these questions brings 'problem areas' to the front of people's minds. If no action is then taken to address these issues, employees are left feeling worse than they did before, as you've falsely raised their expectations with an unspoken promise that you'll do something as a result.

Lack of concrete action, after an engagement survey, is the root cause of this engagement curse. Essentially, there are three reasons why no action is taken:

1. **Engagement surveys don't ask the critical questions** that will pinpoint exactly what action needs to be taken. Organisations often ask generic questions about attitudes, perceptions and job satisfaction but they don't focus on the specific issues that drive engagement or the barriers that employees face. They then get blinded by too much information. As a result, they don't know where the real challenges lie or what actions they need to take to improve the situation.
2. **Change is difficult.** Altering managerial behaviour and the company culture are challenging aspirations. Strong commitment and effective project management are required to instil change in organisations but they're rarely associated with engagement surveys.
3. **Engagement is wrongly perceived as an 'HR issue'.** Engagement surveys are usually driven by HR practitioners who believe in their potential but many practitioners treat engagement as a standalone activity, measured by an external entity, that is separate from other talent management initiatives. In the eyes of employees, the survey becomes just a tick-box exercise. Nothing changes as a result and the blame for this is firmly laid at HR's door, because engagement is seen as HR's responsibility.



## So, what's the answer?

The answer is to turn these three negatives around:

1. **Ask the right questions.** At Head Light, we've carried out a systematic review of published sources, and engagement offerings, to uncover the factors that really influence engagement. We've identified 12 universal areas that fundamentally effect how people feel about their work and their employer. These are the key areas that you need to ask about in your engagement survey: wellbeing; motivation; reward and recognition; involvement; autonomy; teamwork and collaboration; purpose and meaning; relationships; trust; career/personal development; communication and performance management. Ask: To what extent do you experience this at work? And: How important is that to the way you feel? The correlation between those two questions will pinpoint where your priorities should lie.
2. **Take practical action at three levels: senior executives, line managers and individual contributors.** The challenge with engagement actions is to make them stick. That means people have to commit to the process. By prioritising a small number of personalised, 'easy-to-implement' actions in critical areas, at each of these three levels, you can create a more conducive work environment and improve any areas of disengagement. Even small changes can make a noticeable difference.
3. **Devolve the responsibility for engagement to everyone in the organisation.** Engagement should be driven by leaders and managers, with HR providing support, but ultimately it's everyone's responsibility. The way you feel about your work is largely down to you. Line managers have an influence but employees need to recognise that they choose their own attitude and they can implement their own 'engagement actions'.

Engagement may be a concept that builds on commitment, motivation, job satisfaction and the psychological contract. One thing's for sure though: it can pay dividends. Ultimately, the key to breaking the curse of engagement is to ask the right questions and to prioritise specific, practical, manageable actions that senior executives, line managers and individuals can take to drive engagement levels higher.

## References

- [1] MacLeod, D. and Clarke, N. (2009), Engaging for Success: Enhancing Performance through Employee Engagement. Department for Business, Innovation and Skills. London.
- [2] O'Boyle, E. and Harter, J. (2013), State of the American Workplace. Gallup Inc. Washington DC.
- [3] Bedington, T., Smith, D. and Chung, J. (2004). Driving Performance and Retention Through Employee Engagement. Corporate Leadership Council. Washington DC. (Catalog no.: CLC12PD3N8).

## Next Steps

If you would like to take a closer look at the Employee Engagement levels within your organisation and why it may be that your employee engagement survey delivers limited value, please get in touch.



## About Head Light

Head Light is an award-winning talent management and talent retention software and consulting firm that works with clients to define and implement impactful talent management strategies.

Talent Cloud® is our cloud-based portfolio of integrated talent management platform tools designed for those who expect the maximum return from talent management processes. Our training and consulting services uniquely complement our platform that engages employees, managers and senior leaders in the selection, development and progression of people in their businesses.

Companies in the FTSE 350, public sector, large and small, from retailers to high tech innovators have all benefitted from our tools, techniques and expertise. Founded in 2004, we are headquartered in the UK.

Head Light has attained the ISO27001 standard for Information Security. Certificate No 217613.





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