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The Satisfaction Snapshot features:
- relevant articles from healthcare industry experts
- case study success stories
- tips and tools for quality improvement
- patient satisfaction and other industry research findings
- articles with ideas to help achieve success in your role

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Please direct any comments, suggestions or article submissions to:

Manager of Client Relations
snapshot@pressganey.com.au
www.pressganey.com.au
P: 07 5560 7400
F: 07 5560 7490
Introduction

What is engagement? Where does engagement come from? Is engagement really important? Can engagement be measured? How can employers tell if their workforce is engaged? How can organisations increase their employees’ engagement?

Defining Employee Engagement

Press Ganey’s definition of employee engagement is based on the theory of organisational psychologist Dr. William A. Kahn. According to Kahn, personal engagement is “the harnessing of organisation members’ selves to their work roles.”1(p. 694) In other words, employee engagement is how much of our personal selves we bring into our jobs while doing work-related tasks.1(p. 692)

Role Theory

Kahn’s theory of personal engagement is based largely on role theory.2,3,4,5 This theory claims that people approach life like actors approach roles. Actors play many roles throughout their careers; likewise, we all have multiple roles we may play throughout our lives, such as child, spouse, parent, and employee. Our expectations of how people are to act in these roles, and the importance we give to the roles, are based in part on what we have been taught about these roles and from cultural influences over our lifetime.3,6 These expectations also vary from person to person.7,8

An actor’s performance is influenced by his/her opinions of how the role should be played as well as the reactions of audiences or suggestions of a director; likewise, people perform their roles based on their expectations of how their role should be performed as well as the reactions of others.9,10 However, people are not just a collection of roles.11 Each person has their own personal self, or self-identity.6 When people bring parts of their personal selves into their roles in life and work, it is called “attachment,” and the more one is attached to a role, the less the personal self and role are separated.

Conversely, role detachment is when people keep their personal selves at arms length from the roles they play.1,11

Much like an actor, employees consider the execution of workplace tasks to be a role or a part to perform. How employees perform their workplace tasks (role) is influenced by their expectations, the amount of themselves they bring (attach) to their role, as well as the reactions of supervisors (directors) and co-workers (audiences).

The following is an illustration of how employees might adapt to their various roles:

Example

A nurse thinks that he or she should be matter-of-fact but not too technical when interacting with patients during tests, telling patients what tests are being run and why, because he/she thinks that is how nurses are supposed to act; she also thinks that is how patients expect nurses to behave. But part of this nurse’s self-identity is to have fun at work. If the nurse feels attached to her role as a nurse, she is more likely to let part of her self-identity show, so when she begins to draw blood from a patient she will be matter-of-fact but she may also make a joke or two; if she is not attached to her role, she will just act matter-of-fact. The patient expresses discomfort with the blood draw. The nurse may alter her performance, trying to console the patient while attempting to ease the discomfort of the draw, because she thinks she needs to modify her performance of her role to meet how the patient is telling her she should perform—drawing blood with less pain.

Once this nurse has finished with the patient, the nurse’s supervisor comes to speak with her. The nurse may act completely differently around her supervisor than her patient, because she thinks a supervisor expects nurses to act differently around a supervisor than a patient. Therefore, this nurse will act how she thinks her supervisor expects her to, e.g., she will objectively discuss the patient’s medical condition and testing options in accurate, technical terms.

The supervisor then advises the nurse on how to handle the next patient, a squirming child. The nurse will again modify her performance to meet the supervisor’s directions on how to act with a child, e.g., the nurse will speak to the child in a calm voice while persuading the parent to keep the child’s attention during the draw.

This same nurse gave four unique performances of her role as a nurse in approximately 20 minutes on the basis of:

1. her expectations of her nurse-role performance
2. her attachment to her role
3. her beliefs of others’ expectations, and
4. the differing expectations of and reactions to her performances by her patients and supervisor.
Role Theory and Personal Engagement

Kahn’s explanation of personal engagement at work begins by examining the degree to which employees are attached to their roles, and consider their execution of workplace tasks to be more than just a role. In other words, how much has the employee’s work role actually become part of the employee’s self-identity? A personally engaged employee is one who considers her role to be a part of her identity. She brings her personal self into her workplace task performances.

Think of a person who identifies who she is by her job title without first being asked what it is she does. When an employee brings herself into her role, it results in the employee showing her true self, or being herself, while performing her workplace tasks. The engaged employee’s personal self-in-role behaviour causes the employee to become more involved and connected to her work as well as to others at work, resulting in the employee trying or giving more while carrying out her work-related tasks.1(p. 700)

Conversely, a disengaged employee just “plays a part” or goes through the motions without truly being connected to the role and doing the minimum she has to. The extra effort the engaged employee offers is known as “discretionary employee effort” and it has been shown to increase company performance, productivity, and functioning.12, 13, 14, 15 Discretionary effort also appears to reflect positive attitudes toward the workplace.16 Therefore, the degree to which employees bring their personal selves into their roles is how personally engaged they are; and being personally engaged results in increased discretionary employee effort.

Employee Personal Engagement

How does an employee become personally engaged? Kahn tells us that personal engagement occurs when employees find meaningfulness, a safe social climate, and availability within their employment.2(p. 703)

- Meaningfulness is a sense of a return on an employee’s investment in his or her work role performance. Meaningfulness is influenced by the employee’s work roles, work tasks, and work interactions.3(p. 703-07) A field study of Kahn’s work supports these findings.37

Meaningfulness is measured by:
- how much the employee finds his/her job has purpose, significance, and importance;
- how much the employee feels he/she is valued and appreciated in the organisation and by society in general.2(p. 707)

- Safe social climates exist when an employee feels secure enough at work to bring the personal self into his/her work role without fear of harm to their self, status, or career.3(p. 708) Safe social climates are influenced by interpersonal work relationships, group dynamics, management styles and processes, and organisational norms.3(p. 708-13) These findings are supported in a field study which similarly found that a safe social climate significantly affects an employee’s personal engagement.37 Social climates that are predictable, consistent, non-threatening, and with clear boundaries for acceptable behaviour and understandable consequences for unacceptable behaviour facilitate a safe social climate. Unclear, inconsistent, unpredictable, or threatening environments create a risky, and therefore a seemingly unsafe, social climate.1,17 A safe social climate can be influenced by the organisation and measured at the organisational level.

- Availability refers to an employee having the emotional, cognitive, and physical energy to bring the self into his/her work role—i.e., when one is tired, it is easier to act than to truly feel. Again, a field study of Kahn’s work supports these findings.37 Insecurities and outside lives can influence employee availability.1(p. 714-15) It is also suggested that managers who require an abundance of cognitive, emotional, or physical labour from their employees may impede employees’ availability to engage in their roles.17(p. 31)

Research finds that all three conditions exhibit significant positive relations with employee personal engagement. Therefore, when employees view their roles as meaningful, when their work environment makes them feel secure enough to be themselves, and when they have enough energy to be fully available, they become personally engaged.
Workplace Culture and Employee Personal Engagement

The process of employees finding meaningfulness, a safe social climate, and availability at their workplace depends on the workplace providing these elements in their workplace cultures. The powerful influence of the workplace may be more clearly exemplified by how Kahn defines personally disengaged employees: these employees simultaneously withdraw and become defensive of their personal selves when they are in a workplace setting that they feel impedes personal connections, discourages emotional ties, encourages physical and cognitive absences, and interrupts engaged performance or encourages passive performance.\(^1\) The following are examples of engaged and disengaged workers:

**Engaged:**
Jane is a recent Nursing graduate with five years experience as an enrolled nurse, and a passion for efficiency. She accepts a position at facility X in the emergency department, which is where she has wanted to work for the past few years. The emergency department’s director insists upon teamwork, and Jane thrives in this environment. After a few months, Jane decides to speak with the director about another method to triage that she has come across. The director listens to Jane and encourages Jane to provide her with the literature to support her idea. Jane and the director meet again, review the research, and work out a tentative triage process that could reduce their “time to doctor” by two minutes. At the next shift meeting, the director encourages Jane to lead a discussion on the proposed process with the other nurses; a few nurses offer additional suggestions, some of which are discussed and then included, and all agree to try out the new process. The new process works, cutting time to doctor by almost four minutes. This inspires Jane to seek out other ways to cut down waiting times, and she encourages other nurses to try as well. The director recommends Jane serve as a representative on the Quality Improvement Committee. Part of the weekly shift meetings now include “wait-time wipe-outs,” where fifteen minutes are spent brainstorming other process improvements in the emergency department.

**Disengaged:**
Jim has worked at facility Z for two years as an environmental services specialist; he has eight years experience. For the past year, Jim has seen a dangerously declining quality level due to low department staffing and has tried to get the manager to hire more staff for the past several months. The manager has declined Jim’s requests four times and has since stopped replying to Jim’s emails if he notices the word “staff” in the subject line or body. Because of this practice, the manager overlooked an email from Jim warning the manager that people in the department are talking about leaving. A co-worker accepts a position elsewhere, and during a weekly meeting the manager accuses Jim of convincing people in the department to leave. Later, as part of his job, Jim sends the manager an updated regulatory bulletin. The manager sends a one-line email reply, telling Jim to figure out how to handle it, and reminds Jim that it is their year for the accreditation survey. Jim works until 8-9 p.m. several nights a week for months until the requirements are met. The manager says nothing to Jim after the department barely meets standards. Jim stops emailing the manager altogether, no longer talks in committee meetings, and starts leaving earlier in the afternoon. When a co-worker asks Jim about regulations, Jim just forwards a link, rather than getting into a discussion. Jim decides to skip a committee meeting for the first time, and gets defensive when co-workers try talking with him.

From these two examples you can see how the workplace culture significantly affects an employee’s likelihood to become personally engaged as much as, or more than, the employee’s traits or attitudes alone.
Measuring Your Culture of Engagement

The Press Ganey Employee Perspectives Survey has always included measures that capture employees’ opinions of their workplace culture, however, the Culture of Engagement Index is a new addition to the survey analysis. The Index is comprised of ten precise questions from the survey that identify opportunities for your organisation to encourage employee engagement. The questions on the Index measure your employees’ assessment of your culture of engagement, or how well your organisation’s culture promotes the opportunity for employees to personally engage.

The following ten questions comprise the Culture of Engagement Index:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>QUESTION ITEM</th>
<th>Factor Loading</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I am encouraged to come up with better ways of meeting customer’s needs</td>
<td>0.698</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My work provides me an opportunity to be creative and innovative</td>
<td>0.735</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My work group is asked for opinions before decisions are made</td>
<td>0.781</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have opportunities to influence policies and decisions that affect my work</td>
<td>0.797</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Excellent performance is recognised here</td>
<td>0.738</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My supervisor provides coaching to help me achieve my goals</td>
<td>0.800</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My supervisor recognises my ideas and suggestions for improvement</td>
<td>0.818</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My supervisor encourages me to find better ways to do things</td>
<td>0.810</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senior leadership really listens to employees</td>
<td>0.679</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The reasons for the current staffing pattern in my department have been</td>
<td>0.690</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>explained clearly to me</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Extraction method: Principle Component Analysis – 1 component extracted

Total Variance Explained: 57.20%

Cronbach’s Alpha: 0.917

Analysis is based on – 191,785 survey responses between 1/1/2006 and 31/12/2006

Statistical Analysis

Factor Analysis, a multivariate statistical method, was used to reveal that these ten items factor into only one component. This means that, collectively, these ten items relate to one concept: the employee’s assessment of their employer’s social climate. While it is possible in Factor Analysis to “force” components into any desired number of factors, Press Ganey did not do that. These items factor into just one component without being forced or manipulated. Additionally, this finding is robust, and variations of these ten items produced substantially similar results. As the above table shows, each item in this analysis is loaded at higher than the prescribed .60 level, which is commonly used by statisticians to determine proper fit for items in Factor Analysis. Factor Analysis also revealed a total explained variance of 57.20%, which is quite high for a single component.

Reliability was assessed using Cronbach’s Alpha test, which revealed a reliability score of .917. The stringent standard for reliability is .70 or better. The survey questions that comprise the Culture of Engagement focus entirely on measuring the client’s workplace culture. For a number of reasons, the survey does not ask any intrusive or personal questions about the employee’s personality type, behaviour, or disposition. These are unstable questions which may provide flawed data. Measuring an individual employee’s attitudes about the meaningfulness of his/her performance of a particular task is far too personal and intrusive a question to ask on an employee survey. Personality, cognitive, and behavioural measures may predict how an employee chooses to act; however, Press Ganey has found that the better method to measure employee engagement is by measuring the employee’s opinions of their workplace culture. There are several reasons for this:
1. The workplace culture is far less variant than the employee. Kahn points out that personal engagement is not a constant; it varies from task to task, and from role to role. Therefore, when attempting to measure an employee's level of engagement in an annual survey, the information captured will not show an overall level of engagement, but only a single point in time. That static point in time may not accurately reflect the average level of an employee's engagement. Employees' moods vary throughout the day, and people grow and develop over time, so trying to capture an employee's disposition in a single, static survey may offer clues about an employee's potential or past behaviour, but it will not provide sound, statistically valid evidence of whether a person is actively engaged. However, the overall workplace culture does not vary as much as the individual, so the culture is a far more stable and therefore a more accurate element to measure. Finally, social psychology—the research field where role theory originated—typically employs attitudinal measures rather than behavioural measures. Social psychologists find that attitudinal measurements, such as the Likert-type scales that Press Ganey uses, are an accurate and reliable method to measure attitudes such as employee opinions of their workplace.18

2. Having the employer ask questions that directly measure employee behaviour creates a high likelihood of biased data. By asking survey questions for which there are desirable responses, employees are more likely to answer what they think the surveyor (their employer) wants to hear. For instance, the question “On a scale of 1 (very poor) to 5 (very good), how well have you performed your assigned tasks?” will likely result in biased answers. Out of self and job preservation, employees are likely to inflate their scores on questions such as these. Since most employees will respond in the upper ranges, this question will have inflated responses that do not accurately measure anything but what the employee thinks the employer wants to hear. This is known as “social desirability bias;” and it significantly affects the validity of survey data.19,20 Performance-based questions should be directed to the supervisor when reviewing an employee’s performance, not to the employee. Further, asking more intrusive or invasive questions on an employer-based survey about how an employee thinks, acts, or feels, rather than what they perceive or observe, risks employees refusing to participate or not answering truthfully out of fear or distrust or retribution.21

3. The employee's opinion of the workplace is important. There is a large body of research supporting the relevance of what is called “perceived organisational support,” or an employee's perception of how much his or her organisation values and cares for the employee.25 This research has found that there are elements within organisations that can result in employees perceiving the entire organisation as supportive of, or against, the employees' efforts. Organisations that score highly in employee perceptions of support are found to have employees with greater motivation, performance, and outcomes. This line of research is important for organisations and facilities to examine, because it clearly focuses attention on how employees perceive their organisations, and how employees’ perceptions of their organisations have been found to significantly influence how they will choose to behave.26,27 In fact, this research has found that the gatekeeper to an employee's discretionary behaviour is the employee's perception of an organisation's support of its employees.

4. Employers cannot control their employees’ choice to bring more of themselves to their tasks. An employee's choice to engage cannot be forced, coerced, or pushed by an employer. In fact, research shows attempting to do so may actually thwart employee engagement.22,23

However, an employer can control the way the workplace treats employees:

- Are employees given a voice and a stake in their workplace?
- Are the employees overworked?
- Do the employees feel secure in their social climate?
- Do senior leaders listen to employees?

Each of these questions ties to the elements of the workplace culture that Kahn described as leading to personal engagement and which are under an employer's control. Employers cannot control their employees' choices. Trying to force an employee to work harder, to go beyond and give more, is not something an employer can successfully demand—remember, employees giving more than is required is a discretionary effort which comes from employees being personally engaged and is directly affected by the workplace culture. Your workplace culture is what your organisation can control; therefore, the Culture of Engagement Index is the ideal way for your organisation to examine your culture and assess how well you are engaging your workforce.
Culture of Engagement and Health Care

Kahn’s theory is well suited for the health care industry. Other employee engagement measurement variations available in the market today are predominately based on general corporate industry standards, but health care workers’ roles and responsibilities differ significantly from those of general corporate employees. Health care workers are members of caregiving organisations whose “clients” are patients who come to their organisations in times of need. Health care workers’ roles generally involve acts of caring for others and their products and services directly affect the health and well being of patients. The roles of caregivers are inherently laden with stressors that general corporate employees do not face: treatments, trials, side effects, family members, rescues, injuries, resuscitations, and death. These are conditions typically absent from corporate employee experiences. These demands may also significantly impact health care employee personal engagement. Further, the health care industry is also unlike general corporate industries because it faces unparalleled vacancy rates.

Conclusion

Personally engaged employees are vital to a health care organisation’s success, in terms of providing both desired discretionary effort as well as exceptional quality care. Therefore, it is critical for the health care industry to properly examine the concept of employee personal engagement via their employees’ perceptions of their workplace culture. Examining whether the organisation is providing the necessary culture for employees to become personally engaged or not will provide the organisation with accurate and actionable data, prevent flawed measurements of employees’ behaviours, and prohibit confounding engagement measurements with biased, flawed, or distorted data. Focusing on the workplace culture allows an employer to refocus its attention on what the research states is a significant influencing factor on an employee’s willingness to engage: whether or not the organisation supports, protects, and encourages the employee. The Culture of Engagement Index is statistically sound and well tested, and the approach is fully consistent with the entire body of research on discretionary employee behaviour and the desired result of engaged employees.

References


Additional Resources
Shakespeare W. As You Like It. II, vii, 139-142.