

A CROSS-ORGANIZATIONAL EXAMINATION OF SIMILARITIES (AND, ESPECIALLY, DIFFERENCES) IN DRIVERS OF EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT

How do the drivers of employee engagement vary *across organizations*?

Some suggest it's the same handful of factors that determine employee engagement across all organizations - regardless of size, industry, current issues, etc. - and that a narrow focus on that small group of factors is sufficient to improve employee engagement.

We decided to examine this question by analyzing engagement data for employees in two different organizational consortiums:

- branch-level employees in four large financial services institutions in the United States and United Kingdom, and
- staff in four colleges in the United Kingdom, similar to community colleges in the United States (we examined teaching staff and non-teaching staff separately)

The organizations in these two consortiums worked with McBassi over the last couple of years in deploying our Human Capital Capability Scorecard (HCCS) framework to capture information from employees on their work and learning environment.

The core version of the HCCS questionnaire used by these organizations includes a wide variety of questions (68 in total)¹ on items in five general categories, including leadership practices, workforce optimization, and a variety of other elements of an organization's work and learning environment. (For a fuller description of the items included, see <http://www.mcbassi.com/pdfs/HCCS-IndexAndFactorDefinitions.pdf>.)

The HCCS questionnaire also included 2 questions on employee engagement outcomes: the extent to which the employee (a) is satisfied with his/her job, and (b) is willing to contribute effort to the organization over and beyond that which is required.

Using straightforward statistical techniques, it is possible to use the data on employees' responses to examine which of the 68 work and learning environment items (questions) are most closely related to employees' engagement in their organizations.

We selected the two consortiums to ensure that we'd be able to explore the similarities and differences in what drives employee engagement for similar categories of employees within comparable organizations. If the drivers of engagement are substantially different even within *similar* groups, it would be reasonable to assume that they are certainly different for less comparable employees or organizations.

¹ For reasons unrelated to this exploration, only 67 of the questions were included for the UK colleges.

ANALYSIS

For purposes of the analysis, we calculated the correlation for each organization² between each of the 68 HCCS items and an index score that combines the two employee engagement questions described above. We then ranked the correlations from most important to least important, and identified the five items (the “Top 5”) that were most important in determining employee engagement for each organization.

For each consortium, we then compared the Top 5 lists for each of the organizations to determine whether similar items were among the most important items across different (but still similar) organizations.

FINDINGS

Overall, the results of the exploration were quite striking. There is little consistency in the specific elements that drive employee engagement across the different organizations examined, despite the fact that the organizations were selected for the analysis precisely because of their similarity to one another. (And further, within each of the four colleges, the Top 5 lists for teaching staff and non-teaching staff were quite different.)

This exploration indicates that there is no easily-defined small group of factors that can be identified as particularly important in driving engagement for all (or even most) of the organizations.

Financial Services Institutions

Among the financial services institutions, 16 of the 68 core questions appeared in the “Top 5” drivers of employee engagement for at least one of the four institutions. Not a single item appeared in the Top 5 list for more than two of the four organizations. Indeed, only four of the items were in the Top 5 list for more than a single organization.

One item ranked as the most important driver of employee engagement at two of the organizations. However, it ranked 12th and 29th in importance at the other two firms. Three of the items that appeared on the “Top 5” list of one specific organization each ranked no higher than 24th at any of the other three institutions, and they had an average rank of 40th (of 68) at the other three organizations in terms of their impact on employee engagement.

UK Colleges

Teaching Staff: Like the financial services institutions, there was great variety in which specific items were among the Top 5 drivers of employee engagement for each college’s teaching staff. 15 of the 67 core questions appeared on the Top 5 list for at least one of the four colleges, with only 3 of the items appearing on the list for more than one college (two of them did appear on the lists of three of the four colleges).

Again, there were numerous examples of significant diversity across the colleges. The most important driver of employee engagement at one college ranked no higher than 45th for each of the other three colleges (average of 53rd of 67 items).

² Correlations for the teaching staff and non-teaching staff in each of the four colleges were calculated separately, enabling drivers for teaching staff to be compared across colleges, and drivers for non-teaching staff to be compared.

Non-Teaching Staff: There were 17 items that were among the Top 5 drivers of employee engagement for the non-teaching staff in at least one of the four colleges. Only two of these items appeared on the Top 5 lists of more than one college. For each college, its *most important* driver of employee engagement did not appear in even the Top 5 for any of the other three colleges.

Comparing Teaching and Non-Teaching Findings: It is also interesting to compare the Top 5 lists for teaching and non-teaching staff within the same college - in other words, within the *exact same organization*, only for a different staff group. There is almost no overlap between the lists for each college - only 20 percent of the items that appeared in the Top 5 for teaching staff also appeared in the Top 5 list for non-teaching staff within each separate college.

And examining the results across organizations, there was one item that ranked among the two most important drivers of employee engagement for the teaching staff in three of the four colleges - clearly the most consistent cross-organizational driver of employee engagement. Its average rank among non-teaching staff in the same colleges, however, was 26th.

SUMMING UP

As described in detail above, there are few similarities in what drives employee engagement across the organizations examined, despite major organizational similarities within each consortium.

On brief reflection, this is probably an unsurprising set of results. After all, every organization has its own dynamics and culture, strengths and weaknesses, and it makes sense that every organization has different factors that drive important outcomes. Further, every organization changes over time and is in a different position in terms of maturity, stability, and goals. Hence,, what is important for these eight organizations now may well not be what is most important two years from now.

But the findings do run counter to those who suggest that it's possible to identify a small handful of factors that driver employee engagement across all organizations. Today's world is far more complex than that - and even similar organizations have very different needs and should focus their scarce resources differently.

About McBassi & Company

McBassi is a survey firm that helps organizations improve their performance through more effective management and development of people. We have proprietary research-based measurement methods, the analytic know-how, and a proven track record in serving as a catalyst for change and generating win-win results.

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