



Keeping Employees Happy

Everyone knows employee engagement is vital, but getting it right is increasingly difficult as workforce demographics change. **Mary-Anne Baldwin** finds out what companies are doing to keep staff fulfilled and productive

Employee engagement is a slippery fish. It can mean as many things to staff as it can to employers. For some companies, it's simply about motivating people in order to increase productivity and boost the bottom line, others take a longer-term approach. Meanwhile, employees present individual and generational differences in what they want from their jobs.

That's a lot to expect of any employee engagement strategy but not if we boil it down to its essence: in order to have a successful company, you must have happy staff. Get that right and you'll stop them from sleepwalking through their jobs.

As **Fiona Roberts**, Group HR Director at Volkswagen, states: "We know people

are at their best when they're happy at work. The more engaged people are, the longer they stay and the more discretionary effort they give to their organisation."

Meanwhile the converse can be costly, as **Gareth Jones**, Group HR Director at M&G Investments notes: "We strive for engagement because if a company has a negative culture and people are disengaged, then that will leak out to customers and prospective employees. You can't hide it and corporate spin is no longer sufficient."

For **Jonathon Hogg**, Head of People and Talent at PA Consulting Group, employee engagement is about experience, values, fairness and clarity. "In essence,

companies need to ask what things tend to wind people up, because that's where they lose commitment," he offers.

One way companies are achieving engagement is by taking inspiration from other firms. And it's not just about what your competitors are doing. For example, Nestlé hosted Google (which for the sixth consecutive year ranks first in Fortune's '100 Best Companies to Work For') to pick its brains on best practice.

"That was a really inspiring session because the culture is very different to Nestlé but the ideas they operate around are quite pragmatic yet impactful," said **Neil Stephens**, Managing Director of the Beverage Division at Nestlé UK & Ireland. "They really understand the >



type of people they want to attract and retain and then they create the environment, culture and tone around it.”

Surveying the landscape

While external advice is useful, improving engagement typically starts by determining the existing levels of staff satisfaction. A traditional approach is to survey the workforce on what they do and don't like about their jobs, locating areas for improvement. Yet assessment alone is never enough.

“Doing a staff survey in its own right has no impact whatsoever, all you're doing is measuring how people feel,” says **Fiona**. “It's about hearing what people have to say and doing something about it. Writing it down on a piece of paper and sticking it up on the wall doesn't mean anything.”

When putting things into practice, the best approaches tackle both staff satisfaction and productivity so that they benefit workers and employers simultaneously. Take Cisco Systems, which subsidises a child day care centre at its HQ. Cisco's population of female staff is just 20 per cent, but initiatives like this allow women to return to work after having children, meaning the company can improve diversity while also reducing the cost of recruiting and training new talent.

The additional feel-good factor is not to be scoffed at. Cisco Systems' CEO of UK and Ireland, **Phil Smith**, says: “I got loads of feedback, not just from people who have kids, but also people whose kids have grown up and those who just thought it was a great idea.” Cisco is now also looking at new schemes, such as

“Companies need to ask what things tend to wind people up”

care for elderly relatives and loans to assist the firm's first-time home buyers, both of which would help staff stay in their role and remain committed.

For **Alison Speak**, Group HR Director at Oasis Healthcare, recent surveys have focused on building staff commitment to consumer-led change. Oasis, which employs 5,000 dental healthcare staff, had to respond to demand for weekend and evening opening hours.

Part of the process was to create support by communicating the need to adapt during local monthly meetings. “What we have seen is that in those areas in which engagement is higher, it has been easier to get those practices to willingly extend their opening hours,” says **Alison**.

While for some, the need to adapt is led by consumers, for many it's due to the growing expectations of a younger workforce. **Fiona** explains: “Generation Y and the millennials are much more rational about their engagement, rather than emotional. It's about what they can do to develop their career, making it bespoke to them. If the organisation isn't going to provide that, they'll go somewhere else.

It's an approach that **Neil** also adheres to: “Engaging as a leader requires a flexible, humanistic style. Tuning into people

at different stages of their lives and careers requires conscious effort and significant time.”

Charlie Wagstaff, Managing Director of Executive Membership, Criticleye posits: “Each member of staff has individual expectations formed from their own career aspirations. Companies must be adaptive to those varied requirements if they are to stay competitive in the fight to retain talent.”

As **Jonathon** notes: “We need to understand our workforce to engage them, but the onus is not on them to become motivated, that is the organisation's responsibility and it must be tackled consistently at all levels.” ■

Featuring Commentary From:



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