Employee Engagement: Definitions And Approaches

In recent years, there have been various questions raised regarding the definition of employee engagement. One of the challenges of this concept is there is no universal definition, as many scholars have written about this topic. Kahn (1990) defines employee engagement as the “harnessing of organisation members’ selves to their work roles; in engagement, people employ and express themselves psychically, cognitively and emotionally during role performances.” Hertzberg’s (1987) motivation theory influenced Kahn through covering the aspects employees should feel in the workplace; meaningfulness, safety and availability.

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 organisations understand approaches to engagement. Macleod’s Engage for Success (2009) explains there are four key enablers where a common theme for workforces can be identified. There should not be a ‘one size fits all’ approach to employee engagement.

Kruse (2012) interprets employee engagement by defining what it isn’t; employee happiness or employee satisfaction. He explains how employee engagement differs from these. Thompson (2017) agrees with the fact employee engagement is not just employee happiness. For example, an employee that is happy at work may not be productive if they are spending their day laughing with colleagues. However, when linking this back to Kahn’s definition, it would suggest mental and physical ability are needed for overall engagement.

The numerous definitions of engagement can be compared to other constructs, such as organisational commitment, (Robinson, 2004) who has defined engagement as “one step up from commitment”. Saks (2006) supports Robinson’s argument as organisational commitment also differs from engagement as it refers to a person’s attitude and attachment towards their organisations.

Furthermore, according to May (2004) engagement is also associated with the constructs of job involvement. This differs from engagement as it is concerned with how the individual employs themselves during the performance of their job. Kanter (1982) explains participation in the decision-making process in the organisation brings more positive outcomes than bureaucratic structure, as tis involves knowledge sharing with management.

In addition, Meyer and Allen (1991) suggested there are different ways of being committed to an organisation. They argue there are three mindsets of organisational commitment. The effective mindset would demonstrate engagement within the organisation but the others reflect a different commitment from the individual towards the organisation and these mindsets may decrease engagement for the employee. For instance, Simmons (2013) addresses the importance for all employees to be a better citizen 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

organisation and they will assist to direct and motivate others.

To demonstrate, at Future Biogas employees are treated as individuals and refer to the organisation as a family. This is recognised 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 organisational goals and the growth of the business within the industry.

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

An example of going the extra mile 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 traveling time for some. However, FB witnessed employees displaying discretionary effort, as they volunteered to be involved, as they wanted to help the organisation reach their fundraising target. 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 performance of employees as there are various factors which need to be met to reach this goal. Hutchinson recognises managers need to develop and influence employees’ abilities and increase their motivation for discretionary effort. Macleod and Clarke (2009) also suggest engaging managers. As an enabler for employee engagement, managers need to focus on their people, provide them with support and treat them as individuals in order for them to display the wanted behaviours and commitment.

Moreover, there are various types of engagement within organisations; 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 enthusiasm, spirit and joy of individuals and can leads to exhaustion.

Another category of this concept is non-engagement. Non-engaged staff are required in every organisation and often recognised as the employees who are committed to their role from 9am to 5pm 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 because you may not hear or see this employee, but they have a great impact on sabotaging other employees and the organisation.

Employees can become disconnected from their organisation 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 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 the psychological contract may be more powerful as it influences the behaviour and actions of workers on a daily basis. Hutchinson (2013) 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 it is a set of unwritten reciprocal expectations between an individual and the organisation. 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 your own beliefs are shaped by the organisation 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 organisation, the concept of the psychological contract is very broad. Briner (2018) explains 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, employees become disengaged from the organisation. 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.

Patterns and trends of the 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 an development whilst trying to ensure 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 affects engagement.

Bridger (2015) explains employees must be rewarded for good performance and punished for behaviour the organisation discourages. This is known as the carrot and stick approach. The main drive that powers human behaviour is the drive to respond. Taylorism (1911), also known as scientific management, states how removing responsibility of the role from the employee and giving this responsibility to managers has increased efficiency (Armstrong, 2017). Also, Ford (1914) introduced assembly lines which removed responsibility further. In 1963 Hertzberg with vertical job loading. Hackman and Oldham (1974) reinforce this theory with the job design theory (Armstrong, 2017).

Role Autonomy is when employees are given the task and expected outcome but how they do it and who they work with is down to them. (Bridger,2018). This is not always possible in certain roles, for example the products being made at Hewland have to be accurate and precise which leaves little room for autonomy in the production of the parts. However according to Bridger (2018) providing employees with small tasks such as organising the team rota can increase the feeling of autonomy and also give them a voice.

Purcell et al's (2003) Big Idea theory explains successful organisations are those whose mission, vision and goals are transparent and communicated throughout the organisation. This is installed within employees from day one of onboarding, allowing the individual to be aware of how their role and responsibilities contribute with the organisation's goals. This reflects integrity within the organisation. Macleod and Clarke (2009) report suggests for organisations to create cultures of engagement HR need to focus strategies and practices around the key enablers; strategic narrative, engaging managers, employee voice and integrity.

Organisations who encourage the top down, bottom up approaches will be more successful in ensuring EE, as this provides employees with a voice. The top down approaches enable leaders to role model the behaviours and identify the values to employees. The bottom down approach encourages employees to voice their ideas and share knowledge. Employees will gain recognition from knowledge sharing and could empower themselves as an expert in an area from doing so.

HR need to ensure horizontal and vertical alignment within their practices and strategies alongside the organisations mission, vison and goals. Organisation who avoid working in silos will ensure they work in alignment, as departments and employees will have clear communication and be aware of what people are working on to ensure there is no duplication of workload, budgets and wasting employees time. Gleeson (2013) suggests silo working will reduce morale, efficiency and productivity of the organisation.

In order to have a successful management team, there must be an input into the organisational strategy aswell 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. Organisations should be clear on what they expect from the employee and also offer the employee. For instance, Newrest have created a set of values and a stated mission which is also known as an employee value proposition which employees will recognise.

HR practices have been able to develop along with employee demands over the years in order

to ensure employee’s are happy in the workplace. One example of this is Future Biogas offers an employee assistance programme, a confidential helpline which all employees can call at any time regarding any issues they may have such as debt or medical issues. Future Biogas also offer death and service, which offers four times an employees salary to their family if they pass away. Future Biogas’ total rewards package is attractive to new recruits and employees. Another way in which HR practices have developed to meet needs of employees is holding an employee forum once a month. At Newrest, a representative from each department will come to the meeting and express any concerns they have to the management team. Similarly, Hewland Engineering have Think Smart forms, which is a suggestion box for the organisation in ways they can improve.

Another area of focus is learning and development as employability is appealing for many workers so employees expect their organisations to offer opportunities for skills and career development. Moreover, management style and expectations is 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 of what they can expect from the job. This will increase the chances of establishing a realistic psychological contract.

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 employers need to develop stable engagement policies and HR practices in attaining high level of engagement among employees.