

Sean Fitzpatrick has been in the employee engagement space for more than 10 years. "When we first started TalentMap, it was missionary work. We had to explain it and spent a lot of time answering the question: What is the difference between engagement and job satisfaction?" says Mr. Fitzpatrick from the firm's head office in Ottawa.

"We also had to pitch the HR groups, who then had to pitch the CEO or senior executives, and there was quite a bit of internal selling necessary. That's changed in the last two years.

"We are seeing more demand from boards telling the CEO to get an engagement measure in place or the CEO going to HR seeking it out. We don't have to convince people today. For example, one of our clients has a balanced scorecard that looks at customer, operational [and] financial measures and is now adding employee engagement measures. That's a really big change. Employee engagement is now on equal footing with these revenue drivers."

In effect, leading organizations are making the connection between employee engagement and performance, a connection that has been a key area of focus for Excellence Canada.

"We have looked closely at the link between quality management at a strategic level and people wanting to be at work; their 'want-to be-thereness' is what I call it," says Adam Stoehr, vice-president, educational services, Excellence Canada. "Engaged employees buy into the purpose of the organization, they are involved and committed to it, they have a passion and enthusiasm for what's going on at the organization, and they channel that into a focused effort into the organization."

Mr. Fitzpatrick describes employee engagement as a state of flow, and likens an engaged employee to an athlete in the zone, 100% focused, oblivious to the outside world where time becomes irrelevant.

"Engagement is trying to understand how to get employees into a state of flow so they are not watching the clock, and have a heightened emotional and intellectual connection for his/her job and apply discretionary effort to their job."

Excellence Canada's research on this front has found a high correlation between organizations committed to excellence at a strategic level and highly engaged employees.

"We partnered with AON Hewitt organization and had access to 280 organizations and 120,000 employees. We asked them questions about engagement and quality management and tied them together, and found there was a good relationship between whether someone felt engaged at work and whether the organization was committed to quality or excellence," Mr. Stoehr says.

"One of the questions we asked was: Does the organization motivate you to do more than is required to complete your work? In organizations highly committed to quality, the answer was yes. Perhaps now more than ever, organizations, particularly in the private sector, need to tap into discretionary effort in order to gain a competitive advantage in the highly, globally competitive marketplace. You need people to go above and beyond.

"People who are engaged say good things about the company, they are willing to stay and they are willing to thrive. They want to do more for their organization than their job description. If you can make that happen you will do well," Mr. Stoehr says.

AON Hewitt took the research further and tied it to profitability. It established a conclusive, compelling relationship between engagement and profitability through higher productivity, sales, customer satisfaction and retention.

There are a few key drivers of engagement, Mr. Fitzpatrick says, but at the core is how people connect to the organization.

"Do my values align with my work unit, my manager and senior leadership? Do I trust what the leadership is doing and what they say they are going to do? That's at the heart of it: the values. Conversely, if my values are a mismatch with those of my peers, direct manager or the senior leadership, that can drive disengagement and turnover."

What can companies do? Perhaps first and foremost, get your employees involved with a strategy built on quality that crosses all areas of the organization.

"Those organizations that can tell the 'what's in it for me' story really well for employees have a lot of success with engagement," Mr. Stoehr says. "You want employees to have ownership of their contribution, and the ownership piece starts with involvement. Organizations that don't address this well and have a hands-off approach and don't let their employees get involved do not benefit from an engaged workforce."

That is why communication is critical. "Continuing to reinforce and clearly communicate from the top the values, the direction, the vision is important," Mr. Fitzpatrick says.

"People want to feel their work is part of a larger meaning. No matter their role, they want to contribute to something bigger, and that's where leaders often do a good job making that connection for the individual. IBM in its commercials talks about building smarter cities. Those commercials are not targeting consumers. They are targeting existing and future employees. 'Come join us because we are trying to help the world by building smarter cities.' That's the underlying message. And that's coming from an IT firm."

The business case for employee engagement is clear, Mr. Fitzpatrick says. Research shows highly engaged organizations have customer loyalty scores that are 50% to 60% above average. Retention rates are 44% above average. Safety records tend to improve by 50% and profitability can be 33% higher.

"So, clearly, productivity is better but there are also benefits for the employee," Mr. Fitzpatrick says. "Engaged employees enjoy their work more, have better overall health, miss less work. Employee engagement will only grow in importance as future managers take engagement scores as seriously as they do financial measures."

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