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# A study of the Challenges in Implementing Employee Engagement Program with reference to IT organization



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*Employee Engagement is one of the most talked about program in almost all corporations and has also gained heavy traction in education and research world. William Kahn, during the early stage, provided the formal definition of employee engagement as "the harnessing of organization members' selves to their work roles; in engagement, people employ and express themselves physically, cognitively, and emotionally during role performances".*

*Human resource organization is responsible for implementing employee engagement programs to ensure people enjoy the job and are ready to walk an extra mile for the organizational needs. Corporate look for ways to increase the productivity and reduce cost at one end and also look for ways to keep the deep tacit knowledge within the organization on the other. In the corporate world, we have multiple moving parts, on the employer's side, business scenario and business performance expectation and on the employee's side, varying expectation can be attributed to age, gender, educational qualification, social background, personality traits and many more. With so many variables at employees end and all of them carry many to many relationships with other environmental factors, this is where employee engagement becomes complex.*

*This paper expresses author's understanding of the subject as a researcher and as a corporate professional to present the concept in a simplified and in a holistic way. This paper throws light on the challenges and implementation of employee engagement programs through the series of plan-do-check-act.*

**Key Words:** Employee engagement, challenges in employee engagement, implementation of employee engagement, Service model.

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## Introduction

Employee Engagement is one of the few subjects which is well researched by academicians and extensively used by corporations globally. It broadly talks about being able to engage the employee in a job to make them productive from the short and long-term perspective. It is all about the ability of the employer to keep employees happy and motivated to work through various hard and soft aspects of engagements.

While there is no universally accepted definition. William Kahn, during the early stage, provided the formal definition of employee engagement as "the harnessing of organization members' selves to their work roles; in engagement, people employ and express themselves physically, cognitively, and emotionally during role performances." Kahn (1990).

Mike Johnson (2004) in his book "The New Rules of Engagement", wrote that 'the ability to engage employees, to make them work with our business, is going to be one of the greatest organizational battles of the coming years' (p. 1). Thirteen years since the publication, today employee engagement is one of the main HR

agenda across corporate. Soldati, 2007; HR Focus, 2006, mentioned that employee engagement is a challenge which is capturing the attention of executives and HR professionals alike and increasingly, the acceptance in the research world.

Factors which are important to understanding employee as a person are (1) person's background (personality traits, academics or business), (2) Maturity of the person (a function of age and exposure) and (3) Background of the employee (knowledge and risk profile). Similarly, Dan Crim and Gerard Seijts in their article "what engages employees the most or the Ten C's of employee engagement" published in Ivey Business Journal, March/April 2006 explained the 10 C's as Connect, Career, Clarity, Convey, Congratulate, Contribute, Control, Collaborate, Credibility, Confidence.

## Understanding Employee Engagement

With the change in global business economics from manufacturing to service (historically barter to production to sales to marketing) the focus on the softer (emotional, satisfaction etc.) aspect of human (employee) managing the business transactions has expanded.

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Generically, we can define employee engagement as the dedication, determination, and commitment of employees for the common purpose of the organization, expressed through behavior, attitude and passion in a business transaction. The whole purpose is to keep or make employee as productive as possible to drive enhanced economic benefits from the association.

During the industrial revolution, efforts were to increase the capability of the machine to make business more productive. Now during service age, efforts are on increasing the overall productivity of service environment which consists of people, process, and technology. Employee engagement largely addresses the people aspect. We have heard that the cost of business through new customer is higher than that of existing customers. Similarly, the ability of the organization to get the maximum economic benefit through existing employee is higher than that of a new employee and this makes corporate world invest in employee engagement.

Employee engagement has two facets, employer, and employee. Some of the basic understanding built through my qualitative research, personal trait, age, education background, social background and business environment drives people (employee) towards or away from engagement

Bad economic conditions forces people to walk an extra mile out of fear or compulsion, while for the organization, it can be called as an engaged employee, but as a researcher, if he does not find happiness, self-motivation, and then it is not sure if the employee is really engaged. It is same employee segment who drives attrition in growing economy when demand is higher than supply at an equal capability level.

Interestingly, there are super engaged employees, they love their job and they are always ready to go an extra mile for their organization but still decides to move on to another job. Studying the behavior of such people(employee) will be another research.

#### Content Quality

The research revealed that 247 respondents (41 per cent) out of the 600 look for positive reviews on the film content before deciding to watch a film in theatres. If the reviews on the film content are average or bad, they choose not to watch in theatres. Content emerges as the top factor, which influences the audience from visiting the theatre. As there is high importance attached to content quality, when the reviews are not favorable, theatre visits are affected correspondingly.

#### Literature Survey

Aon Hewitt, conducts a yearly survey on trends in global employee engagement and parameters used for tracking engagements are:

- |                      |                    |
|----------------------|--------------------|
| 1. Senior Leadership | 2. Brand Alignment |
| 3. Manager           | 4. Innovation      |

- |                               |                                  |
|-------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| 5. Recognition                | 6. Work-Life Balance             |
| 7. Benefits                   | 8. Communication                 |
| 9. Coworkers                  | 10. Learning and development     |
| 11. Managing performance      | 12. Organizational Reputation    |
| 13. Pay                       | 14. Work processes               |
| 15. Physical work environment | 16. Autonomy/ choice             |
| 17. Safety                    | 18. Sense of Accomplishments     |
| 19. Work Tasks                | 20. Diversity                    |
| 21. Career Opportunities      | 22. Customers                    |
| 23. BU/Division leadership    | 24. Customer focus               |
| 25. People/ HR practices      | 26. Valuing people/ People focus |
| 27. Resources                 |                                  |

Aon measures the engagement by geography, generations (age) and job functions. Close to engagement subject, research is also done and published by APQC and Deloitte University Press.

Theresa M. Welbourne (2007), in her article "Employee engagement: Beyond the fad and into the executive suite", wrote that globally 14-30% of employee are engaged at work. Context and behavior of the employee engagement lead to a level of engagements so are role-based models with five specific roles are proposed to manage engagements. Historical perspective is provided to understand the reason of lowering employee connect and how behavior will help more than the attitude of employees. The Manager's energy level is key to employee engagements and managers with low energy has fewer engaged employees.

Nancy R. Lockwood (2007), through her article "Leveraging Employee Engagement for Competitive Advantage: HR's Strategic Role" mentioned about how a strong relationship is visualized on employee engagement and business success. Her paper captures the shift in focus from employee retention to engaging with minds and hearts. It also captures the top trends which lead to employee engagement (why to engage employee - Need). With simple three levels of employee engagement, it focuses on clear, consistent and honest communication in conjunction with manager-employee relationship to manage employee engagement.

Research paper published by OPTUM in 2014, where research was done to understand the impact of demographics on consumer engagement, usage of types of information or tools, preference for healthcare, communication, likelihood of engagement post communication and understand the activities which employee undertake to make lifestyle changes, gender difference acts as key point to understand on engagement related to site, communication, health etc. Worksite location plays a significant role in how an individual manages their health and therefore worksite wellness programs are important enablers for engagement

Simon L. Albrecht, Arnold B. Bakker, Jamie A. Gruman, William H. Macey, Allan M. Saks. (2015), in their article "Employee Engagement, human resource management

practices and competitive advantage.” talks about integration across HRM and engagement models-performance models and provides a visibility on physical-energetic, emotional and cognitive components of engagement. It also helps in relating distinct attitudes such as job satisfaction, job involvement and commitment and big 5 dimensions of Neuroticism. A very well referenced article (more than 140) shows engagement and dis-engagement level using A survey with thoughts on engagement and competitive advantage in organization, engaging employee through its life cycle, rightly designed and managed organizational performance management system and practices will have a positive impact on attitudes.

Parameters used by Wipro for employee engagement are:

1. Wipro Meets – a meeting of Wipro Senior management with all Wipro employees.
2. Blogs @ Wipro – the techie way to connect with employees.
3. Eco-eye– the ecological sustainability initiative at Wipro.
4. Women of Wipro – under the Wipro Diversity umbrella – appreciating women.
5. Professionals in Wipro.
6. Fit for Life– the well-being initiative @ Wipro.
7. Meet your People Program – for quality and sustained Touch-time with employees.
8. Recognition @ Wipro.
9. For kids @ Wipro.
10. Safety @ Wipro.
11. Wipro Cares.
12. Mission 10 X

Whereas in HPE, engagement programs are categorized under (not an exhaustive list) :

1. Work environment
2. Building careers
  - a. Talent Recruitments
  - b. Learning communities
  - c. Learning and development
  - d. Mentoring
  - e. Leadership development
  - f. Redeployment
  - g. Diversity
  - h. Performance Management
3. Rewards and benefits
  - a. Compensation
  - b. Benefits
  - c. Recognition program
4. Pride in HPE
5. Engaging with people
  - a. Forum and Networks
  - b. Employee Feedbacks
  - c. Leadership connects
  - d. Employee volunteerism and giving
  - e. Retiree engagement
6. Wellness Programs

### Planning an Engagement Program

With multiple definitions, different expectation and multiple constituents of the employee engagement, it is a big challenge for employers to build a program to engage employees for the mentioned purpose. Largely employee engagement programs are based on the key inputs which ensure the availability of the happy and right employee which helps to support better economic benefit. Employers look at challenges in their business to build the program. Challenges and program can be described as generational (gender and multi-generational workforce), availability/absenteeism (Health programs), attract talent (pride, social connect), capabilities (learning n development, job rotation) retain talent (pay and recognition) etc.

This paper is a constraint to look at one case/scenario and take it to its logical conclusion. The implementation of the program is split into four stages.

Stage 1 – Plan – it is about understanding requirements/ expectation and drawing a common minimum program from where we can have a measurable result to connect engagement program with engagement

Stage 2 – Do – it is about actually executing the plan

Stage 3 – Check – It is about checking if the program is executed as per the plan

Stage 4 – Act – It is about doing a course correction or fine correction or speeding up the execution or any other improvement which can help achieve the set objectives.

Plan – Plan to engage the employee

To engage the employee, it is important that the employer should list all the challenges it wants to address and also collate all the constituents of employee engagement from the employee's perspective. Let's take an example to explain my views on planning.

#### Employers want to

1. Reduce siloed working culture between teams;
2. Connect with people directly to understand them better;
3. Establish customer focused working style than internally focused.

#### Employee wants to

1. Connect with leadership to hear the information (strategical/ tactical) directly;
2. Understand the work done by other teams – capabilities perspective;
3. Wants to explore better opportunities – job rotation.

Employers/ leaders can make many programs to fulfill these expectations. However, the success of these programs lies in actionable details and clear accountabilities. A key aspect of planning is defining

1. Why do – what to do – business case and benefit measurement system;
2. What needs to be done – description of the actions;

- Who will perform the actions – along with R&R and RASCI;
- When to perform the actions – mapping of action on the timeline and aligning with other key organizational programs/ transactions;
- How – actionable details of What;
- Communication – What type of communications channels to be used agree on sender and receiver role.
- Availability of support system (job aids, IT systems) to execute the plan.

Below figure depicts the structural output from the planning phase of the activities, where program related questions of What, When, Why, Who, Where get addressed.

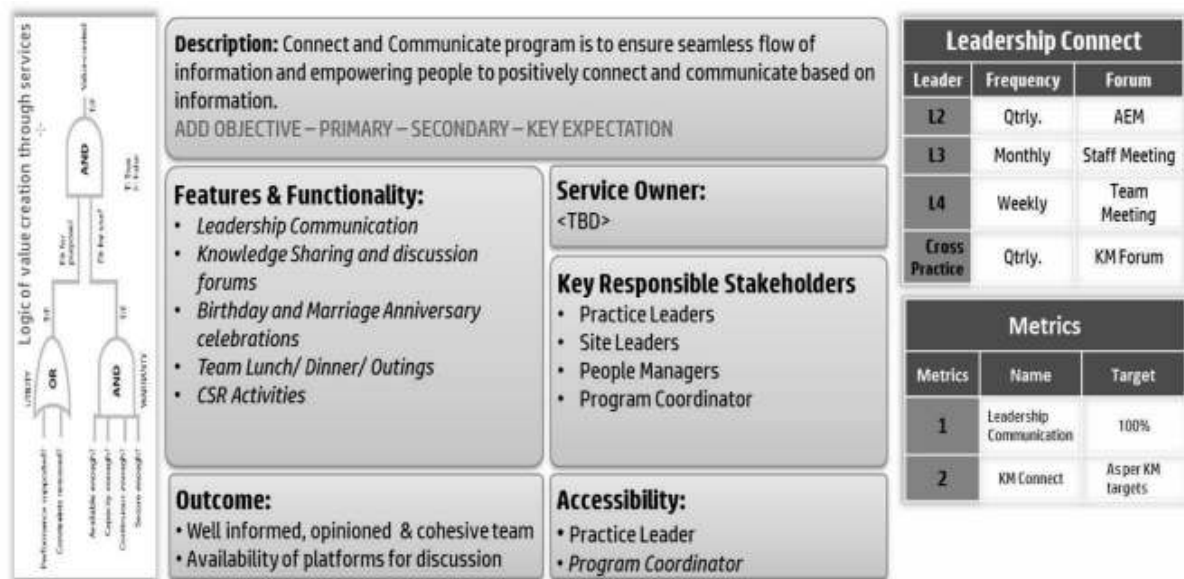


Figure 1 – Service model for Connect and communicate program

Service Model is an assembly to deliver value to employees (customer). In this model, we look at enhancing gain and/or reducing pain for the customer and ensuring the enhanced status is maintained for the substantially longer period.

Do – Engage employees  
“Do” is all about actual execution of the planned timeline and report the success and challenges in execution. There could be multiple initiatives possible for the objective(s), for simplicity and ease of flow, one initiative is presented, e.g.

Connect and Communicate		
Initiative – Personal connect		
WHO	WHAT	WHEN
Site Team	Birthday/ Marriage Anniversary Celebration	Monthly/ on specific date
Site Leaders	Team Lunch/ Dinner/ Outings	Quarterly
Site Leaders	CSR activities	Weekly

**Table1** – Responsibility chart against agreed action on Connect and communicate programs.  
To execute this program/ project/ set of activities (Birthday / Marriage Anniversary celebration), one needs to do the following activities:

- Decide on the day of celebration by geographical location;
- Select the people to coordinate activity in various other locations;

3. Coordinate with vendor/ finance processes for buying snacks, gifts and/or celebration items;
4. Inform all team members about the celebration time and venue;
5. Confirm the availability of people (celebrating their birthdays and marriage anniversaries) and other team members;
6. Adjust snacks, gifts and/or celebration items based on people's availability.

List of activities and modified RASCI needs to be built for the business environment and employee participation. Finally, celebrate!!

Check – Check engagement levels

Check stage is more to confirm the compliance with the agreed plan. It can also be called as verification stage. Two key messages are drawn at this stage.

1. Are we able to do what we agreed to do – are there any challenges – can this be made more interesting and participative.
2. Collect the active and passive feedback on the effectiveness of the exercised activity in engaging people.
3. Check if employees are excited to join on their own or someone needs to force them to join just to run a checklist? Check if the employees give more ideas for improvements? Finally, check if after these events employees are more comfortable working in a team in a cohesive way?

#### Challenges to Employee Engagements

All business leaders acknowledge that employee engagement is important, and one of the biggest challenges for business is the level of employee engagement. Multiple studies established that engaged employees contribute more and better to the business, however, how to effectively engage employees remains a challenge. This challenge is because of the environment and background of both the parties i.e. employer and employee.

Challenges due to employer's environment and background can be listed as

1. **The expectation of results in short timeline added with economic benefit measurement** – Corporate enterprise operates in financial aligned quarterly result mode format and expects the same from all the programs. All behavioral programs or programs aimed at winning trust, heart, and mind takes time. Thus, creates a challenge. Also, empirically it is hard to get evidence for monetary benefit from an engagement type of projects.
2. **Communication** – All types of communication in the corporate world is subject to (1) confidentiality -- Many information is argued as confidential, so the message is massaged to an extent that the information looks redundant/ run of the mill and does not give

any sense of association to large employee groups. (2) **Timeliness** – Organizations run in the hierarchy and last mile connectivity through line managers remains a challenge. Many cases it is termed as “it is not going to change my life and work so why bother” (3) **Message distortion** – Message distortion happens through two people - Managers who carry the message and add their interpretation and convenience to the message. Message distortion at employee level – Employee distorts the message due to two reasons – one is the ability to comprehend the message due to knowledge and maturity level and another reason is so-called smartness where they look at all communication as immediate benefit perspective and tend to ignore.

3. **Accountability and responsibility** – Accountability and responsibility are shifted down the hierarchy and many times it dilutes the program. Challenge is on ownership, whether owned by HR function or business function. Employees are directly attached to business function hence execution of such program generally lies with business. However, the business transaction remains a priority for business managers hence engagement type program some time takes back seat;
4. **Leadership (vision and mission)** – It is historically proven that leaders connect with people easily because of their capability. They engage with people better and make them follow their words resulting in combined force towards common organizational goal. However, when a typical manager type person becomes leaders, they fail to excite people and create followership;
5. **Selection of parameters to engage** – When an organization builds employee engagement program they fail to connect with employee aspirations and decide on parameters which are not accepted by employees hence engagement effectiveness remains a question. Retirement planning for the young workforce is the wrong parameter, but the matured employee knows the benefit of this and wants such plan which will be good but eventually becomes a wrong parameter to engage young employees.

Challenges due to the employee's environment and background can be listed as:

1. **Age and multi-generational varied expectation** – With a multi-generational workforce in action in most of the organization, we get varied expectation from a various segment of employees. One size does not fit all, employees start to detach from the program and also create bad publicity for the program. This creates biggest challenges in managing employee engagement.
2. **Change in expectation** – With the change in business dynamics, age, work experience and exposure

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expectation of employee changes adding to the challenge.

3. **Perception and relativity** – Individual employee's understanding of the business dynamics and what helps to collective gain makes employee participate in the engagement activity or take that as another transaction.
4. **Educational background** – Education background (not just qualification) differentiate the way employees look at the bigger picture. In the scenario of not being able to see the benefit along with the management creates the challenge for the manager to run engagement programs.
5. **Geographical-cultural-language barriers** – Cultural and language at a time does not allow people to open up and express their expectations to get engaged. The classic example for this could be - Peter G. De Krassel in his book *Feasting Dragon and Starving Eagle*, page 336, mentioned about a fictitious survey done by the UN and question asked was "Could you please give your honest opinion about solutions to the food shortage in the rest of the world?" This survey was a huge failure because in Eastern Europe they did not know what "honest" means. In Western Europe, they didn't know what "shortage" means. In Africa, they didn't know what "food" meant. In China, they didn't know what "opinion" means. In the Middle East, they didn't know what "solution" meant. In South America, they didn't know what "please" meant. And in the U.S. they didn't know what "rest of the world" meant.

### Conclusion

While I acknowledge that there is no universal definition Employee Engagement, We can conclude that employee engagement is all about - Managing employee task behavior/ work roles which are to ensure that employee is involved with work and work environment, committed to business outcomes and have satisfaction with the task behavior/ work roles which he/ she is performing.

While research scholars and industry research organizations published various parameters which can be used to engage people, the onus is with the employer to select right parameters based on business environment, geographical condition and type of employee they employee by capability and maturity.

In summary, to answer "the" question - who all are engaged, there is no one answer. Few of the state ments give a good view of engagement:

1. Engagement with job and engagement with the employer are recognized as two different aspect.
2. People may be engaged with the job but may not be engaged with employer/manager.
3. During the early stage of career, less than 15% of employees are engaged with job and employer, 35% of

people are engaged in the job and not sure about engagement with the employer. 50% of people are neither engaged with job nor with the employer.

4. People, who are high-risk takers are very engaged, they plan their work very meticulously and are involved with the work.
5. Adding the age factor in risk profile, older age people are not high on risk-taking but are also highly engaged.
6. Female workforce is more engaged with work than male counterparts.

Largely due to varied/conflicting expectation between employee and employer (inter - intra), employee engagement is a very challenging subject from an execution perspective. It is easy to implement the employee engagement programs in smaller and homogeneous workforce environment. Challenges go manifold with the multi generational workforce, multi-country heterogeneous workforce environment. Keyword in employee engagement is "engagement", personal connection and communication. Like in software development "Agile methodology," we can take the smaller group to visualize and realize the benefits.

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