

The Science of Engagement at Work

By Professor John P. Meyer, Industrial and Organizational Psychology, Western University

If you have ever ‘gotten lost in your work,’ you know what it feels like to be engaged. But this is just one form of engagement. You might also have worked on tasks that, while not particularly enjoyable, gave you a real feeling of accomplishment when completed. This, too, is a form of engagement. Indeed, looking back you may have realized what kept you going through the difficult periods was the belief that what you were doing was ‘worth the effort.’ Finally, you may also have witnessed engagement in others, or at least inferred that they were engaged by their enthusiasm, level of energy and high rate of productivity.

So, we know engagement when we experience it, and we recognize it when we see it, but can we study it scientifically, and to what end? (Incidentally, we probably also know what it feels like to be disengaged and have likely encountered it in others, but I’ll focus here on the positive.)

Let me begin with the question: To what end?

First, in order to invest in programs designed to foster engagement, organizations need to be convinced engagement matters. Will such investments pay off in terms of greater retention, job performance, innovation and overall organizational success? Will employees themselves benefit? Are there any downsides to engagement?

Second, organizations need to know what they can do to increase engagement. Is it a selection problem (getting the right people), a management problem (treating them right) or both?

But before we can take a scientific approach to answering any of these questions, we need to be more precise in defining what it is. Knowing it when we see it isn’t good enough; we have to be able to measure it so we can determine empirically how it relates to conditions in the workplace and desired outcomes.

Within the academic literature, one of the most widely accepted definitions of engagement was provided by Wilmar Schaufeli of Utrecht University and his colleagues: “A positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind that is characterized by vigour, dedication, and absorption.”

This definition served as the basis for the development of a multi-item survey instrument designed to measure employees’ level of engagement in their work. Engagement can also be measured more broadly with regard to the goals and values of the organization or work unit.

These instruments have been used in a large body of research addressing the questions posed



above: Does engagement matter and, if so, how can we get it?

This research has established a positive association between levels of engagement and work behavior; employees who are engaged in their work and committed to their organization are more likely to stay, be absent less frequently, and perform more effectively than those who are not. Where engagement often shows its strongest association is with discretionary effort – a

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willingness to go above and beyond minimal requirements. Importantly, engagement also relates positively to employees’ own physical and psychological well-being.



Among the potential downsides to work engagement, is the threat to work-life balance – the more time and energy individuals expend on work-related activities, the less they have available for other aspects of their lives. Similarly, it might result in the channeling of energies toward tasks that are engaging to the detriment of those that are less so. Although there is no strong evidence at that these are common problems, it does not preclude the possibility for some individuals.

Given the potential win-win for employers and employees, the obvious question becomes: How do we get engagement?

Science has addressed this issue as well and has identified a number of conditions that must be met for individuals to feel fully engaged in their work. For example, they need to feel their contributions are important and appreciated, need to know what is expected of them, and must have the resources needed to cope with the demands placed upon them. The extent to which these conditions are met will depend in large measure on the work climate.

There are a variety of things that organizations can do to create a ‘climate for engagement,’ including working with employees to establish clear and attainable objectives, providing frequent and constructive feedback, ensuring adequate training, communicating clearly,

demonstrating interest in employees professional and personal growth, and helping them to achieve work-life balance.

The Western Faculty and Staff Experience Survey is built on this science and allows employees at Western to provide feedback on how engaged they feel and, importantly, share their perceptions of the climate at Western and within their work units.

The results provide a wealth of data and there will not be complete consensus on what's working and what isn't. However, the results are a valuable source of information for leaders and teams to review, discuss, and importantly, set priorities for action.

John P. Meyer is professor and chair of the graduate program in industrial and organizational psychology in the Department of Psychology. He has authored/edited five books on employee commitment, engagement, and retention and maintains an active program of research in these areas.

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