

# 15

# Employee engagement

## KEY CONCEPTS AND TERMS

Commitment	Leader-member exchange
Discretionary behaviour	Motivation
Engagement	Organizational citizenship behaviour
Extrinsic motivation	Organizational engagement
Intrinsic motivation	Social exchange theory
Job engagement	

## LEARNING OUTCOMES

On completing this chapter you should be able to define these key concepts. You should also understand:

- The meaning of employee engagement
- Job engagement
- Organizational engagement
- The theory of engagement
- The components of engagement
- The drivers of engagement
- Outcomes of engagement
- Enhancing engagement
- The significance of burnout

## Introduction

Engagement takes place when people are committed to their work and the organization and are motivated to achieve high levels of performance. According to the CIPD (2012: 13): 'Engagement has become for practitioners an umbrella concept for capturing the various means by which employers can elicit

additional or discretionary effort from employees – a willingness on the part of staff to work beyond contract. It has become a new management mantra.' As David Guest (2013: 231) remarked: 'One of the attractions of engagement is that it is clearly a good thing. Managers are attracted to the concept because they like the idea of having engaged employees and dislike the prospect of having disengaged employees'.

According to Truss *et al* (2013: 1): ‘The notion that individuals can be “personally” engaged in their work, investing positive emotional and cognitive energy into their role performance, was first proposed by William Kahn (1990) in his seminal article in the *Academy of Management Journal*’. Schaufeli (2013: 15) commented: ‘It is not entirely clear when the term “engagement” was first used in relation to work, but generally the Gallup Organization is credited with coining the term, sometime during the 1990s’.

Reilly and Brown (2008) noted that the terms ‘job satisfaction’, ‘motivation’ and ‘commitment’ are generally being replaced now in business by ‘engagement’ because it appears to have more descriptive force and face validity. Truss *et al* (2013: 2657) suggested that ‘engagement may constitute the mechanism through which HRM practitioners impact individual and organizational performance’.

This chapter starts with an analysis of the meaning of employee engagement and continues with an assessment of the components, drivers and outcomes. This is followed by a discussion of what Macey *et al* describe as burnout, the possibility of which should be taken into account in pursuing the engagement strategies described at the end of the chapter.

## The meaning of employee engagement

Kahn (1990: 894) defined 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’. There have been dozens of definitions since the explosion of interest in the concept during the 2000s. Harter *et al* (2002: 269) stated that engagement was ‘the individual’s involvement and satisfaction with as well as enthusiasm for work. A later definition was produced by Macey *et al* (2009: 7) who defined engagement as ‘an individual’s purpose and focused energy, evident to others in the display of personal initiative, adaptability, effort and persistence directed towards organizational goals’.

Alfes *et al* (2010: 5) saw engagement as having three core facets:

- 1 *intellectual engagement* – thinking hard about the job and how to do it better;
- 2 *affective engagement* – feeling positively about doing a good job;
- 3 *social engagement* – actively taking opportunities to discuss work-related improvements with others at work.

## Job or organizational engagement or both

The term ‘engagement’ can be used in a specific job-related way to describe what takes place when people are interested in and positive – even excited – about their jobs, exercise discretionary behaviour and are motivated to achieve high levels of performance. It is described as job or work engagement. Truss *et al* (2006: ix) stated that: ‘Put simply, engagement means feeling positive about your job.’ They went on to explain that: ‘The engaged employee is the passionate employee, the employee who is totally immersed in his or her work, energetic, committed and completely dedicated’ (ibid: 1).

Organizational engagement focuses on attachment to or identification with the organization as a whole. The Conference Board (2006) defined employee engagement as the heightened connection that employees feel for their organization. Robinson *et al* (2004: 9) emphasized the organizational aspect of engagement when they referred to it as ‘a positive attitude held by the employee towards the organization and its values’. This definition of organizational engagement resembles the traditional notion of commitment.

Perhaps the most illuminating and helpful approach to the definition of engagement is to recognize that it involves both job and organizational engagement as suggested by Saks (2006) and Balain and Sparrow (2009).

## The theory of engagement

Saks (2006: 603) thought that a strong theoretical rationale for engagement was provided by social exchange theory. As he described it:

Social exchange theory argues that obligations are generated through a series of interactions between

parties who are in a state of reciprocal interdependence. A basic tenet of social exchange theory is that relationships evolve over time into trusting, loyal and mutual commitments as long as the parties abide by certain 'rules' of exchange... [These] usually involve reciprocity or repayment rules such that the actions of one party lead to a response or actions by the other party.

He argued that one way for individuals to repay their organization is through their level of engagement. In other words, employees will choose to engage themselves to varying degrees and in response to the resources they receive from their organization. This is consistent with the description of engagement by Robinson *et al* (2004) as a two-way relationship between the employer and the employee. Balain and Sparrow (2009: 16) concluded that:

To understand what really causes engagement, and what it causes in turn, we need to embed the idea in a well-founded theory. The one that is considered most appropriate is social exchange theory, which sees feelings of loyalty, commitment and discretionary effort as all being forms of social reciprocation by employees to a good employer.

As discussed below, the concept of engagement can be further explored in terms of its make-up (its components), its antecedents (the forces that drive it), and its outcomes.

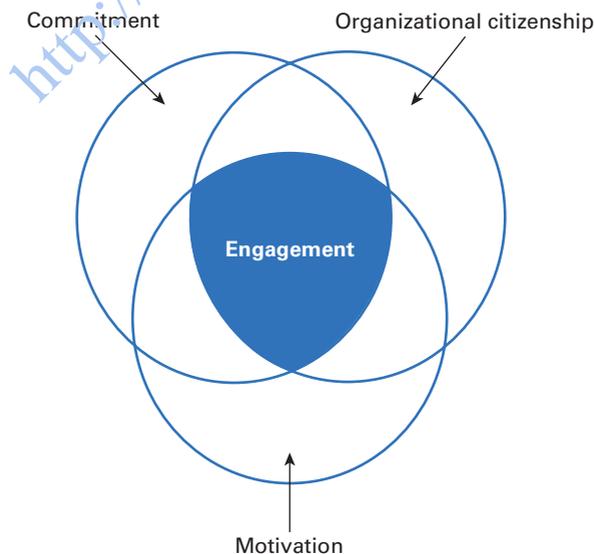
## The components of employee engagement

Engagement can be regarded as having three overlapping components: motivation and commitment as defined in Chapters 13 and 14 and organizational citizenship behaviour (OCB) as defined below. A model of engagement containing these components produced by the Institute for Employment Studies (Armstrong *et al*, 2010) is shown in Figure 15.1. Work or job engagement is also associated with job satisfaction. These components of engagement are considered below.

### Engagement and commitment

The concepts of commitment and organizational engagement are closely related, although Robinson *et al* (2004) stated that while engagement contains many of the elements of commitment it is not a perfect match. They suggested that it does not reflect sufficiently two aspects of engagement – its two-way nature, and the extent to which engaged employees are expected to have positive attitudes about their job. However, Storey (2007: 8) referred to the concept of employee engagement as 'a term that broadly equates with the notion of high commitment'.

**FIGURE 15.1** IES model of employee engagement



**SOURCE:** Armstrong *et al* (2000)

Yalabik *et al* (2013: 2803) proposed that ‘affective commitment’ (ie an emotional attachment to, identification with and involvement with the organization) is an antecedent of work engagement.

## Engagement and motivation

The motivation element in engagement is intrinsic. Macey *et al* (2009: 67) commented that: ‘When the work itself is meaningful it is also said to have intrinsic motivation. This means that it is not the pay or recognition that yields positive feelings of engagement but the work itself.’ They also pointed out that engaged employees ‘feel that their jobs are an important part of what they are’ (ibid: 127).

## Engagement and organizational citizenship behaviour

Organizational citizenship behaviour (OCB), as originally defined by Organ (1988), is employee behaviour that goes above and beyond the call of duty and contributes to organizational effectiveness. It is discretionary and not explicitly recognized by the employing organization’s formal reward system.

As Little and Little (2006) observed, OCB is an outcome of the attitudes of job satisfaction and organizational commitment. It is similar to the definitions in the engagement literature of being respectful of and helpful to colleagues and willingness to go the extra mile or work longer hours, try harder, accomplish more and speak positively about the organization. They noted that this desirable behaviour has been shown to be related more to the work situation than to individual dispositions.

## Engagement and job satisfaction

Job satisfaction was defined by Locke (1976: 1304) as ‘a pleasurable or positive emotional state resulting from the appraisal of one’s job and job experiences’. Engaged employees are more likely than not to be satisfied with their jobs.

Job satisfaction, like commitment, is regarded by Yalabik *et al* (2013: 2805) as an antecedent of work engagement. It has been shown to be related to other attitudes and behaviours. Positively, it is related to organizational commitment, job involvement,

organizational citizenship behaviours and mental health. Negatively, it is related to turnover and stress.

## Drivers of employee engagement

To be able to do anything about engagement it is necessary to understand the factors that affect this – its antecedents and drivers. Crawford *et al* (2013: 59–62) listed the following drivers:

- *Job challenge* – this takes place when the scope of jobs is broad, job responsibility is high and there is a high work load. It enhances engagement because it creates potential for accomplishment and personal growth.
- *Autonomy* – the freedom, independence and discretion allowed to employees in scheduling their work and determining the procedures for carrying it out. It provides a sense of ownership and control over work outcomes.
- *Variety* – jobs which allow individuals to perform many different activities or use many different skills.
- *Feedback* – providing employees with direct and clear information about the effectiveness of their performance.
- *Fit* – the existence of compatibility between an individual and a work environment (eg, job, organization, manager, co-workers) which allows individuals to behave in a manner consistent with how they see or want to see themselves.
- *Opportunities for development* – these make work meaningful because they provide pathways for employee growth and fulfilment.
- *Rewards and recognition* – these represent both direct and indirect returns on the personal investment of one’s time in acting out a work role.

In addition, the quality of leadership exercised by line managers is an important driver Hakanen *et al* (2006) established through their research

that supervisory support is positively related to employee engagement as is involvement in decision-making and day-to-day control over tasks and schedules. Macey and Schneider (2008) argued that when leaders have clear expectations, are fair, and recognize good performance they will have positive effects on employee engagement by engendering a sense of attachment to the job. Research by MacLeod and Clarke (2009) confirmed that line managers played a key part in promoting engagement by providing clarity of purpose, appreciating employees' effort and contribution, treating their people as individuals and ensuring that work is organized efficiently and effectively so that employees feel they are valued, and equipped and supported to do their job.

Macey *et al* (2009: 11) emphasized the work environment and the jobs people do. They noted that: 'Engagement requires a work environment that does not just demand more but promotes information sharing, provides learning opportunities and fosters a balance in people's lives, thereby creating the bases for sustained energy and personal initiative.'

## Outcomes of engagement

Stairs and Galpin (2010) claimed that high levels of engagement have been shown to relate to:

- lower absenteeism and higher employee retention;
- increased employee effort and productivity;
- improved quality and reduced error rates;
- increased sales;
- higher profitability, earnings per share and shareholder returns;
- enhanced customer satisfaction and loyalty;
- faster business growth; and
- higher likelihood of business success.

Alfes *et al* (2010: 2) asserted that engaged employees perform better, are more innovative than others, are more likely to want to stay with their employers, enjoy greater levels of personal well-being and perceive their workload to be more sustainable than others.

However, Sparrow (2013: 102) warned against over-confident claims that high engagement results

in high performance. He suggested that it is possible that being in a well-performing unit makes employees engaged, not the other way round a possible. In other words 'reverse causation' (A situation where A might have caused B but it is just as likely that B caused, A).

## Enhancing employee engagement

Research conducted by Towers Perrin (2003) showed that enhancing engagement is a process that never ends and it rests on the foundation of a meaningful and emotionally enriching work experience. Furthermore, it is not about making people happy, or paying them more money. Important as pay and benefits are in attracting and retaining people, it was found they play a less significant role in engaging people in their work. The elements found to be fundamental for engagement were strong leadership, accountability, autonomy, a sense of control over one's environment and opportunities for development.

Jenkins and Delbridge (2013) proposed that in line with Storey's (1989) contrast between 'hard' and 'soft' HRM it was possible to distinguish between hard and soft management approaches to enhancing engagement. In their case studies of two companies, one adopted a soft approach that centred on work design and promoting positive workplace conditions and relationships between management and employees. Enhanced employee engagement was seen as a positive outcome – productivity was not the primary goal. In the other case, a 'hard' approach concentrated on directly increasing employee effort to improve organizational performance. In the company using a soft approach high levels of engagement were reported, while in the other company high levels of employee disengagement were evident.

To enhance employee engagement employers have to address issues concerning both aspects of engagement – job and organizational engagement. These are interrelated and any actions taken to enhance either aspect will be mutually supporting. However, it is useful to consider what can be done specifically in each area, bearing in mind the particular circumstances and needs of the organization.

## Enhancing job engagement

Line managers play a key role in enhancing job engagement with the support of organizational initiatives in the areas of job design, learning programmes, including leadership development for line managers, and performance and reward management systems.

### Line managers

According to the Gallup Organization research reported by Coffman and Gonzalez-Molina (2002: 130), to enhance engagement managers should:

- make employees aware of their individual strengths;
- provide continuous feedback on how those strengths are being used;
- ‘clear the path’ so that employees can do what they do best without unnecessary distractions;
- build trust by showing commitment to the employee’s success;
- challenge people within areas of their distinctive strengths;
- focus upon particular skills and knowledge in order to build talent into strength;
- give employees ownership and creation of their outcomes.

Extensive research by Lewis *et al* (2012) for the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development resulted in the production of the competency framework for employee engagement management set out in Table 15.1.

### Job design

Job design is an important factor in enhancing engagement. Macey *et al* (2009: 69) commented that: ‘People come to work for pay but get engaged at work because the work they do is meaningful.’ Intrinsic motivation and therefore increased engagement can be generated by the work itself if it provides interest and opportunities for achievement and self-fulfilment. Robertson and Smith (1985) suggested

that the aim should be to influence: 1) skill variety, 2) task identity, 3) task significance, 4) autonomy, and 5) feedback.

### Learning and development programmes

Learning and development programmes can ensure that people have the opportunity and are given the encouragement to learn and grow in their roles. This includes the use of policies that focus on role flexibility – giving people the chance to develop their roles by making better and extended use of their talents. It also means going beyond talent management for the favoured few and developing the abilities of the core people on whom the organization depends.

The strategy should also cover career development opportunities and how individuals can be given the guidance, support and encouragement they need if they are to fulfil their potential and achieve a successful career with the organization in tune with their talents and aspirations. The actions required to provide men and women of promise with a sequence of learning activities and experiences that will equip them for whatever level of responsibility they have the ability to reach should be included in the strategy.

### Developing engagement through performance management

Performance management processes as described in Chapter 25 can be used to define individual goals and responsibilities, offer feedback on performance and provide the basis for developing skills and planning career development. Although the organization can create a performance management system, its effectiveness will depend on the interest and competence of line managers.

### Developing engagement through reward

Reilly and Brown (2008) asserted that appropriate reward practices and processes, both financial and non-financial and managed in combination (ie a

**TABLE 15.1** Employee engagement management competency framework

Competency	Description
Autonomy and empowerment	Trusts and involves employees
Development	Helps to develop employees' careers
Feedback, praise and recognition	Gives positive feedback and praise and rewards good work
Individual interest	Shows concern for employees
Availability	There when needed
Personal manner	Positive approach, leads by example
Ethics	Treats employees fairly
Reviewing and guiding	Helps and advises employees
Clarifying expectations	Sets clear goals and defines what is expected
Managing time and resources	Ensures resources are available to meet workload
Following processes and procedures	Understands and explains processes and procedures

**SOURCE:** Adapted from Lewis *et al* (2012: 9)

total rewards approach), can help to build and improve employee engagement, and that badly designed or executed rewards can hinder it. Their model, based on research of how reward policies influence performance through engagement, is shown in Figure 15.2.

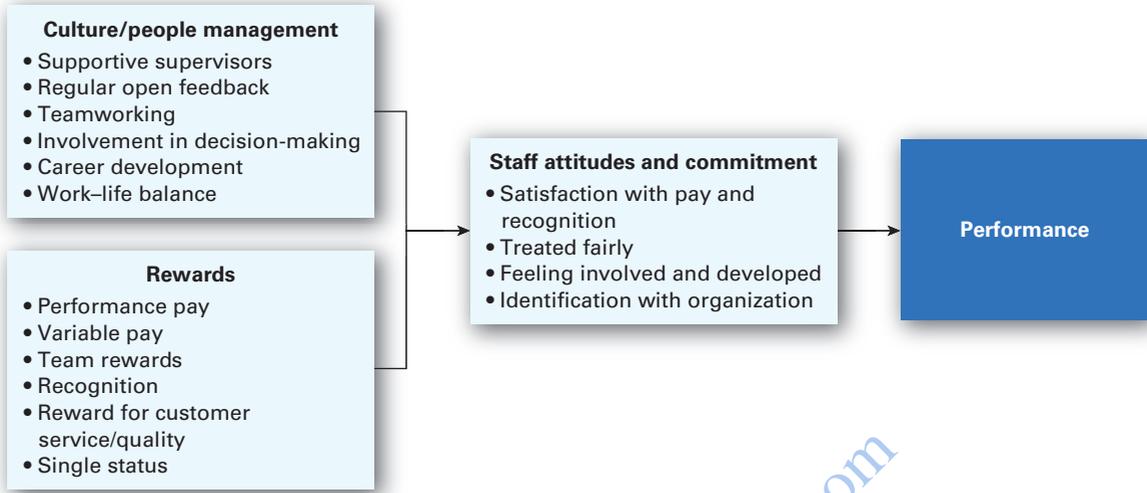
## Enhancing organizational engagement

The approaches that can be used to enhance organizational engagement consist of: 1) high-involvement management; (2) providing more scope for employee voice; (3) developing 'the big idea'; and 4) tackling the work environment.

### **High-involvement management**

Organizational engagement can be developed through high-involvement management – a term first used by Lawler (1986) to describe management systems based on commitment and involvement, as opposed to the old bureaucratic model based on control. The underlying hypothesis is that employees will increase their involvement with the company if they are given the opportunity to manage and understand their work. Lawler claimed that high-involvement practices worked well because they acted as a synergy and had a multiplicative effect.

High-involvement management means treating employees as partners in the enterprise, whose interests are respected. It also means providing employees with a voice, as discussed below.

**FIGURE 15.2** How reward policies influence performance through engagement

SOURCE: Reilly and Brown (2008)

## Employee voice

Employee voice policies enable employees to effectively communicate their concerns to management. Rees *et al* (2013: 2781) suggested that there is a direct relationship between the effectiveness of such policies and levels of employee engagement. They invoked social exchange theory, which states that employees engage in reciprocal relationships that can develop into trusting, loyal and mutual commitments when certain 'rules of exchange' are observed. Employees will demonstrate positive attitudes and behaviours when they perceive that their employer values them and their contribution. They will demonstrate higher levels of performance if the work environment is one in which employees have a voice in the sense that they can share their concerns, opinions and ideas with their employers.

## The 'big idea'

A basis for building organizational engagement was established by the longitudinal research in 12 companies conducted by Professor John Purcell and his colleagues (Purcell *et al*, 2003: 13). They found that the most successful companies had 'the big idea'. This was 'a clear sense of mission underpinned by

values and a culture expressing what a firm is and its relationship with its customers and employees'.

## The work environment

Increasing organizational engagement through the work environment means developing a culture that encourages positive attitudes to work, promoting interest and excitement in the jobs people do, reducing stress and recognizing the importance of social interaction. For example, Lands' End, the clothing company, believes that staff who are enjoying themselves, who are being supported and developed and who feel fulfilled and respected at work, will provide the best service to customers.

It was suggested by Guest (2009) that engagement can be achieved through effective leadership of a strong, positive culture that ensures the enactment of organizational values; through strong management that supports employees' work and well-being; through careful design of systems and jobs to enable employees to contribute through full use of their knowledge and skills; through effective employee voice; and through provision of appropriate resources, tools and information to perform effectively.

## Burnout

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There is a negative side to engagement – burnout, defined by Maslach and Jackson (1981: 99) as ‘a syndrome of emotional exhaustion and cynicism’. Burnout can take place when individuals are placed under too much pressure to perform. It is sometimes called disengagement. Workaholics who put themselves under too much pressure can suffer burnout.

Burnout is a response to high stress caused by excessive job demands, which include attempting to meet challenging, relentless and unreachable standards. It is more likely to happen when workers have no control over their work environment. Burnout can result in failure, absenteeism or leaving the organization.

To avoid the pursuit of engagement resulting in disengagement and burnout, managements need to ensure that employees are not put under too much pressure, are provided with support when required and are recognized for what they can achieve with the resources they have available (including their own skills and ability to exert effort). Alfes *et al* (2010) concluded that a responsible approach to engagement requires a work environment that does not just demand more but fosters a balance in people’s lives.

## Measuring engagement

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Engagement surveys provide the basis for the development and implementation of engagement strategies. A review by Vance (2006) of a number of such surveys identified the following common themes:

- pride in employer;
- satisfaction with employer;
- job satisfaction;
- opportunity to perform well at challenging work;
- recognition and positive feedback for one’s contributions;
- personal support from one’s supervisor;
- effort above and beyond the minimum;

- understanding the link between one’s job and the organization’s mission;
- prospects for future growth with one’s employer;
- intention to stay with one’s employer.

The important thing to do with an engagement survey (an example of which is given in Chapter 64), as with any form of attitude survey, is to ensure that proper use is made of it through the ‘triple-A’ approach: Analysis, Assessment and Action. It is also important to inform employees of the results of the survey in full and involve them in assessing the results and agreeing actions.

## Conclusions

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Keenoy (2013: 198) referred to the message delivered by employee engagement prescriptions as ‘motherhood and apple pie’ and suggested that the term engagement could be replaced by job involvement, empowerment, high performance management or ‘any of the other putative solutions’ to the problem of getting employees to be more productive. He argued that ‘there are powerful generic echoes of McGregor’s (1960) Theory Y’ – the view that people are creative beings who under proper conditions will not only accept but also seek responsibility.

David Guest (2013: 233) warned that: ‘The risk must be that it [employee engagement] will soon join the pantheon of laudable aspirations with which we can all agree, including happiness, quality, growth and sustainability; goals that most of us would like to pursue, concepts that some people think we can measure, but goals that will remain ultimately elusive in many if not most cases’.

However, John Purcell (2013: 247) contended that: ‘Employee engagement is worth pursuing, not as an end in itself, but as a means of improving working lives and company performance’. And the CIPD (2012: 1) noted that:

Engagement is not about driving employees to work harder but about providing the conditions in which they will work more effectively – it is about releasing employees’ discretionary behaviour.

## CASE STUDY Land Registry – modernizing the public sector

Land Registry is a government executive agency employing 300 people. Engaging and enthusing its staff has been a challenge. The Swansea site was an underperforming office within an otherwise successful organization. Today it is one of the most productive Land Registry offices as a result of a planned high-engagement working change process.

The change process focused on the engagement of individuals at all levels. An internal project board masterminded a series of staff surveys and conferences. Senior management team away-days and line management training and coaching to improve performance management and the development of soft skills were all resourced in-house. Training initially focused on senior management team development, so they could understand and lead the changes, building middle management skills so that they could lead change and create an atmosphere in which employees could have confidence in an open appraisal process, and team building and development. Service to customers was always at the centre of the process. Personal development plans, based on Land Registry's

national core competency framework, provided the opportunity to discuss knowledge, skills and 'most importantly' attitudes. The framework bands nine competencies in five main performance areas:

- *Delivering results*: planning and organizing the workload; and dealing effectively with/managing change.
- *Effective teamwork*: contributing to the team's performance; and building and leading a team.
- *Knowledge and experience*: acquiring and applying technical/specialist knowledge.
- *Providing a quality service*: meeting customers' needs; and anticipating problems and achieving solutions.
- *Personal effectiveness*: communicating effectively; and showing initiative and determination.

Each of these competencies can be demonstrated at four levels: from entry to senior management level.

### Key learning points: Employee engagement

#### The meaning of employee engagement

Engagement happens when people are committed to their work and the organization and are motivated to achieve high levels of performance. It has two interrelated aspects: 1) job engagement, which takes place when employees exercise discretionary effort because they find their jobs interesting, challenging and rewarding; and 2) organizational engagement, when they identify with the values and purpose of their organization and believe that it is a great place in which to work and to continue to work.

#### Components of engagement

The components of engagement are commitment, organizational citizenship behaviour, motivation and job satisfaction.

#### Theory of engagement

Engagement will have behavioural outcomes leading to what can be described as an 'engaged employee'. A strong theoretical rationale for engagement is provided by social exchange theory.

#### Drivers of engagement

Macey *et al* (2009) emphasize the importance of the work environment and the jobs people do. Alfes *et al* (2010) established that the main drivers of engagement are meaningful work (the most important), senior management vision and communication, positive perceptions of one's line manager and employee voice – employees having a say in matters that concern them.

### Enhancing engagement

Line managers play a key role in enhancing job engagement with the support of organizational initiatives in the areas of job design; learning programmes, including leadership development for line managers; and performance and reward management systems.

The approaches that can be used to enhance organizational engagement include: (1) high-involvement management; (2) developing 'the big idea'; and (3) tackling the work environment.

### Burnout

Burnout can take place when individuals are placed under too much pressure to perform. It is sometimes called disengagement.

### Measuring engagement

Engagement surveys provide the basis for the development and implementation of engagement strategies.

## Questions

- 1 What is employee engagement?
- 2 What is job engagement?
- 3 What is organizational engagement?
- 4 What are the components of engagement?
- 5 What is organizational citizenship behaviour?
- 6 What is the relationship between engagement and commitment?
- 7 What is the relationship between engagement and motivation?
- 8 What is the relationship between engagement and organizational citizenship behaviour?
- 9 What are the main outcomes of engagement (name at least four)?
- 10 What are the main conclusions about engagement reached by the research conducted by Saks (2006)?
- 11 What are the main conclusions about engagement reached by the research conducted by Balain and Sparrow (2009)?
- 12 What are the main conclusions about engagement reached by the research conducted by MacLeod and Clarke (2009)?
- 13 What are the main conclusions about engagement reached by the research conducted by Alfes *et al* (2010)?
- 14 What is social exchange theory?
- 15 What is discretionary behaviour?
- 16 What are the main drivers of engagement as listed by MacLeod and Clarke (name at least three)?
- 17 How can job engagement be enhanced?
- 18 What is the role of job design in job engagement?
- 19 How can organizational engagement be enhanced?
- 20 What is high-involvement management?

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