

# What Drives Engagement in the Digital Age?

**R**ecent research indicates a worrying trend - an increase in employee disengagement. In Australia alone, Gallup Research found that only 18% of workers are actively engaged, leading to an overall decline in productivity, retention and profit.

As the economic recovery gathers speed, employers are looking at how to motivate, attract and retain staff again, understanding that having a high performing workforce is critical in gaining a competitive advantage.

For the past year, staff have sought more security in the face of possible redundancy or reduced working hours. Long term stability has outweighed short term pay and working conditions, and we have even seen staff and managers taking pay cuts to keep a business solvent.

## Employee expectations changing

With the threat of job losses fading, managers have to focus once more on employee engagement. A Gallup survey shows that last year, disengagement cost the Australian economy \$31.5 billion in lost productivity. The problem is partly driven by managers who fail to set and maintain standards of performance. However, changes in HR legislation have also left managers feeling unable to implement consequences for poor performance.

The Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry reported that there could be 10,000 unfair dismissal cases per year under the Workplace Relations Act 1996, with an average cost of \$10,000 to the employer for each claim. When successful claims are reported in the press, managers become even more wary of tackling poor performance.

Insync Survey's 2009 Retention Review indicates an increasingly mobile workforce with fewer personal commitments leading to higher staff turnover in many industries. With staff moving jobs and even countries more often, they are no longer looking for a job for life but for a job to meet their short term needs and their personal career goals.



On top of this, employees have far greater access to their social lives through their computers. It's no longer a matter of monitoring personal phone calls; staff are juggling work commitments with their personal emails and social networks and are in touch with friends across the world throughout the working day.

## Line managers hold the key to engagement

Feedback from a line manager is a significant factor in staff engagement, which includes clarifying roles and responsibilities as well as providing ongoing feedback in performance reviews.

### Why is disengagement increasing?

- Economic recovery drives competition for staff which shifts the balance of power in their favour, increasing complacency and disengagement
- Managers have focused less on performance management and staff have not had the feedback they need
- The changing attitude to work of younger generations leads to a greater focus on personal goals than on team performance
- Increased HR legislation makes managers afraid to implement consequences for poor performance

When targets are fair and achievable, all resources are available and staff are fully trained, under-performance is most likely due to disengagement, and disengagement can result directly from a lack of accountability.

Often, managers feel that staff disengagement is a failing on their part, so they make allowances, give extra time for tasks, manipulate management reports and work late to show that they are leading the way. Unfortunately, some staff will take advantage of this because the manager is demonstrating that he or she won't allow the team to fail. In the short term, the manager is trying to keep the team running but in the long term, this behaviour hides the true extent of the problem.

Therefore, a manager's behaviour impacts on staff engagement in two ways. Firstly, some staff will take advantage of 'hands off' management and only deliver to the level that their managers demand. Secondly, some staff need more guidance and feedback in order to give their best. Since many managers also have a technical or operational responsibility, performance management is often the activity that gets put off for another day.

## Increasing engagement

Whilst engagement is a line management issue, managers must also recognise that individuals are in control of their own behaviour and so there are some very simple guidelines that managers can follow to increase accountability and engagement:

- **Set an example.** If you want your staff to be engaged, you have to be.
- **Set clear boundaries.** Tell staff clearly what you expect from them and what their targets are.
- **Set consequences.** Tell staff what happens if they fail to meet those standards.
- **Enforce boundaries.** If you don't, you lose credibility. It's better to have no standards than to set them and not enforce them consistently.
- **Measure performance:** If you aren't measuring something, it's difficult to improve it.
- **Give feedback:** Help staff to keep on track by giving objective feedback against targets, and give encouragement, praise and recognition where it is warranted.

Disengagement is a widespread problem with many causes, yet the solution comes back to the relationship between staff and their line managers. Leaders and HR teams can provide support, while clear roles and communication give staff the foundation they need to fully engage. While the indications are that disengagement is worsening overall, you can put in place measures and support systems within your own organisation to create the right culture for communication, engagement and performance. ●

## Learn how to build an engaged workforce!

Turn to page 10 to read our case study on how optimism helped an organisation improve employee engagement and boost the performance of their salespeople by 37%.

### Question:

What method of learning delivery has the highest recall?

### Answer:

Of the various methods of learning, film is proven to have a higher recall and greater impact through situational and simulation learning formats. Why? Films are specifically designed to be entertaining and engaging, whilst carrying the same amount of information. Plus, a facilitator can build on the content of a film by posing questions for discussion, and this further enhances the group's awareness and recall.

When training large numbers of people, film is a consistent delivery method – you know that everyone has seen and heard exactly the same information. Yet the same person can watch the same film twice and learn more each time they view it.

Therefore the impact of film is a combination of its engagement, its consistency and its use as a group discussion tool.

