



Seeking "Worktopia:" Changing Work Expectations

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It's time once again for you to conduct the annual employee satisfaction survey. As always, the business goal is to reduce turnover costs and increase employee retention (and productivity). You'll gather the responses, analyze them carefully, and report the results to senior management. You'll suggest several interventions to improve employee engagement. But how certain are you that you've identified the root causes of employee dis-engagement and suggested the appropriate interventions?

Sources of Employee Dis-engagement

It seems that everywhere you go you hear the term "employee engagement" discussed. Groups like Gallup and Hewitt have found that good organizations with engaged employees average 1½ times more revenue. There's plenty of discussion linking the lack of engagement to the different attitudes of the generations or to the organization's culture. The common sources of lack of engagement are usually found in management practices, business policies, culture and environmental issues, and compensation and recognition factors. Added to these, right now, are employees' economic concerns for their job and the viability of the organization.

While all are valid factors, there's another deeper reason that, despite many interventions, employee engagement continues to be a challenge.

Changing Work Expectations

What many line managers, HR managers, OD consultants, recruiters, outplacement consultants, career counselors, job seekers, and organizations that research workplace issues have noticed is that employees' expectations are evolving. Workers in virtually every category are seeking jobs that provide far more than a paycheck. Many are hunting for "meaningful work." (If you don't believe this, check out the 18 million hits this term has on Google.) Many believe that work is one of the principle means through which life takes on meaning.

Social psychologists consider this to be a cultural evolution based on world views, values, and individual motivations. Many in Western societies no longer accept work as a "means to an end." They have higher expectations; they seek "meaningful work." Followers of Abraham Maslow would state that more people have arrived at the higher psychological level of what he called "self-actualization."

However, organizations are slow to adapt to the change in employee expectations. As pointed out by Harvard professor Shoshana Zuboff, "People have changed more than the business organizations upon which they depend." In order to meet the complexity of the workplace and employee expectations, some business leaders are trying new forms of capitalism. For example, John Mackey, CEO of Whole Foods, is a strong supporter of "conscious capitalism."

What is Meaningful Work?

Trying to define "meaningful work" is about as difficult as defining "happiness." What both terms have in common is that the definition is personal and based on individual personality and life conditions (including where one lives and what is happening to the person). For some, "meaningful work" may mean a work environment similar to that of a caring family. For others it means exciting, challenging tasks, filled with recognition, advancement and material rewards. For many today, the term suggests work that provides them with joy, deep satisfaction, and a feeling of purpose.

Where Did This Trend Come From?

According to The Work Foundation, the search for meaningful work began in the 1970s. It is attributed to increased affluence in Western societies, a rise in people asking "Who-am-I?" types of questions, and the replacement of skilled craft jobs (producing a tangible output) with knowledge-based ones.

What Are Organizations Doing to Engage Employees?

Organizations that are interested in retaining engaged employees are attempting many different tactics. In addition, they are seeking awards that name them a "best company" or "employer of choice."

Here are some tactics that organizations are applying to engage and retain employees:

Category	Tactic
Work Environment and Culture	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Provide activities to maintain a "fun" environment• Support camaraderie or friendship among employees• Provide a safe, clean, attractive work facility• Support work/life balance• Demonstrate care about employees• Support community or social cause
Business Practices	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Demonstrate positive values• Insist on honest and ethical work practices• Provide open and frequent communication between employees and leadership• Establish efficient work processes• Promote existing employees based on merit• Implement an effective performance management system
Employees and Managers	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Establish manager's role to coach and develop employees• Establish collaborative, non-competitive work teams• Provide mentoring for employees• Provide for diversity in the workforce• Provide regular feedback on performance
Benefits and Perks	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Offer flexible work schedules• Offer flexible work locations ("virtual")• Provide competitive salaries and benefits• Offer perks tailored to specific needs of employees (e.g. childcare, health club, parties, trips)• Provide training and job development• Establish opportunities for career growth
Job Satisfaction	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Match work to skills and strengths• Provide work that is interesting or challenging• Ensure clear work expectations• Communicate that employee work is valued• Recognize significant accomplishment

What Can Organizations Do To Provide Meaningful Work?

Self-knowledge and finding meaningful work is an employee's responsibility. However, this search requires a positive work environment in order to flourish. If your organization truly wishes to help employees find meaning or purpose through their work, a much deeper knowledge of the individuals is required - not what you will find on their resumés or in performance reviews. Five things your organization can do to support employees' search for meaningful work are:

1. Clearly define the culture of your organization and that of its individual functions. Define not only the values but how they play out in expected behaviors and company policies.
2. Establish and maintain a work environment that supports both the growth of the organization and the growth of its employees.
3. Place the right person in the right job based not only on skills, strengths, and experience, but on "cultural fit," which encompasses the individual's personality, patterns of thinking, and cultural values.
4. Give employees jobs that have meaning and significance to *them*. Be aware and take action when jobs and people change. (A new manager almost always triggers changes in expectations.)
5. Regularly survey employees to uncover potential problems and identify specific work satisfiers.

Another Employee Development Intervention

Another important intervention is to provide employees with information or training to assist them in assessing their own work values and strengths. Help them understand what their current work expectations are and what could cause their expectations to change. Your annual employee survey may find engagement increases as you support them in their self knowledge. A good career development program will include self-assessments and goal setting activities. While this may sound too "touchy-feely," remember there are a number of research studies to substantiate that:

- about 50% of employees are not satisfied (i.e. disengaged) with their jobs and
- engaged employees create improved business results.

Searching for Worktopia

Worktopia, that perfect workplace, may be an ephemeral goal. However, despite growing unemployment, people still desire to find a great place to work. They want a workplace that allows them to apply their skills and satisfy their personal and psychological needs. As employees continue to want meaningful work, organizations with a healthy culture, a positive work environment, and support for self-development will be more successful in increasing revenue and retaining valued employees.