

It's time to think differently about employee engagement



Work.Happy

If the global pandemic has taught us anything, it's that we can all adapt to change more easily than we think. Overnight, we as individuals and we as organisations have moved away from rituals that we've been wedded to for years and that weren't fit for our new world. We've quickly adopted new practices that serve us and our businesses much better.

So why are organisations still pursuing engagement practices that aren't delivering the results they want and desperately need?

Is it time for change?

Employee engagement is broken. Global leader Gallup have been reporting on low UK engagement figures for a number of years. Their most recent survey was in 2017 and revealed that only 8% of UK employees were engaged – meaning 92% are disengaged.

The knock-on effect to our economy is significant. Perkbox estimate that these disengaged employees are costing the UK economy £340 billion every year in lost training, recruitment costs, sick days, productivity, creativity and innovation.

Fast forward to 2021, the majority of UK businesses are now operating with a remote workforce and the issues associated with a growing problem of disengagement are starting to emerge.

However, it isn't the case that businesses are ignoring engagement. On the contrary, Harvard Business Review reported in 2018 that US companies spent \$720 million on employee engagement and People Lab report that here in the UK, HR leaders dedicate 15% of their week to employee engagement.

With time and budget being invested into employee engagement, we need to ask ourselves the question “what's not working?”



Putting data under the spotlight

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Employee engagement has become synonymous with collecting data. Every year, the majority of businesses will issue their employees with a long and unwieldy survey. They are often sent out with a target put upon managers to achieve a high completion rate, a target which is then passed on to individuals. Considering the nature of the survey, the conditions it operates in already don't sit comfortably.

Once completed, the survey will usually reveal results with marginal, if any change from the previous year - despite months of action and schemes implemented in response to fixing the engagement metrics from past survey results. And so, the cycle continues. Another year of doing the same thing and expecting a different result. All feels a bit like Groundhog Day, or insanity as Einstein concluded!

Over the past couple of years there's been a slight change to the cycle with many organisations introducing pulse surveys. These shorter versions either complement or replace the annual survey and are run more frequently – thus collecting less data but more often.

More data to add to the pot, but to what end?



Aggravating aggregates

The problem with data with regards to employee surveys is twofold. Firstly, the process of collection is fraught with issues including:

- + The aforementioned pressure put upon managers to achieve a set target of completed questionnaires from their teams.
- + Widespread mistrust amongst employees in the confidentiality of the answers they give – particularly if the survey is connected to the payroll system.
- + Survey questions being determined from a set of aggregated research outcomes - individuals are being asked to consider a set of questions that someone else has deemed important. Drives irrelevance and dis-engagement to the survey itself.
- + Given these factors, what is the quality of the answers being given? How much reflective thinking has gone into each response?

Knowledge, as we've heard many times, is power. Data can better inform decisions, but let's shine a light on the second part of the problem - the data being collected through employee surveys is aggregated. Presented to senior leaders as interesting looking graphs and beautiful info graphics but actually housing high-level aggregated data.

This data goes on to inform solutions to fix really important issues affecting employee engagement. But high-level, aggregated data will only ever inform high-level solutions such as 'Fruit Friday' or 'Lunchtime Yoga'. All positive things – but will they get to the nub of a problem? If an individual is pretty happy at work and doesn't have any thorny or pressing issues, then yes! Such schemes may feel like a bonus, but for everyone else, will they improve engagement levels and boost the amount of discretionary effort each individual is motivated to release?

One size doesn't fit all. What happened to valuing diversity?

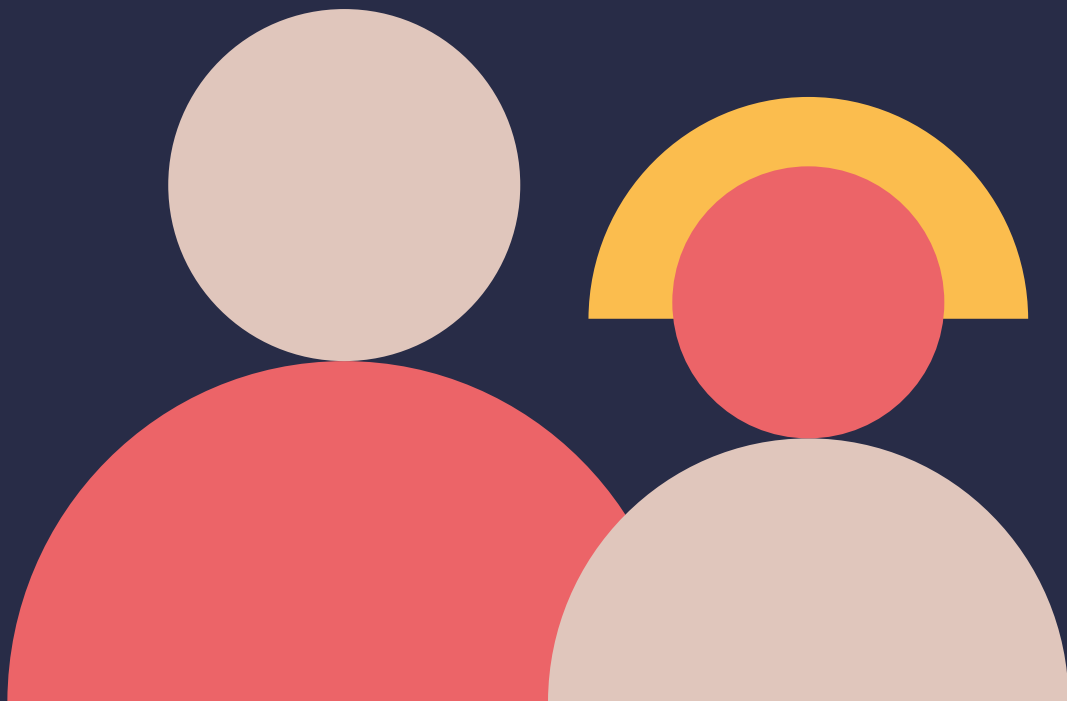
We are all complex, unique individuals dealing with different situations, influences, beliefs and needs at any given point in time. What might be impacting happiness and satisfaction for a particular employee at work today, may change tomorrow and will be different to the feelings being felt by a neighbouring colleague. We are all deliciously different from one another, all of the time.

These differences are slowly being recognised, but there's still a long way to go. Now more than ever before, individuality, equality and diversity are being recognised and indeed celebrated in our society but has not yet trickled down into a really important dimension of our lives – our feelings about work. We are not a collective, we are individuals and engagement metrics will never improve until this is recognised and perceptions and feelings in the workplace are valued at individual level.

In May 2019 the CBI published a report “Solving the productivity puzzle through the power of people”, working with McKinsey & Co they reported that businesses with high engagement levels see 22% higher profits and businesses that develop the strengths of their staff have been found to reduce turnover by up to 72%.



Who is responsible?




Recognising and solving individual needs in the workplace may sound like something that is more realistic in small businesses rather than the huge, global beasts. But this isn't the case. The success factor starts with where the ownership of employee happiness lies.

For years, organisations of all shapes and sizes have been assuming ownership and responsibility for how their employees feel. Seeing it as their job to set the conditions for engagement, to manage the employee experience appropriately, to create an environment where the employee can feel engaged. This is arguably very sensible, but in many cases, this approach alone creates a relationship where the employees give feedback about what's wrong and the organisation (HR, Senior Leaders, Managers, etc.) assumes the responsibility to try and fix it. Sound familiar? This approach creates an adult – child relationship where the individual typically has low ownership over the outcome and no responsibility for their part in delivering it.

This approach also places a huge responsibility for individual happiness at work on the shoulders of line managers. What a load to bear! To do this successfully requires great skill, to understand each member of their team in depth, help them to recognise how they are feeling, diagnose the real underlying cause and set in place actions to make it better. Some managers are clearly more talented in this area than others, but even those who are great at it, don't always have the time to support all the members of their team effectively.

Managers however, often assume the role of 'fixer'. "Tell me what's bothering you and I'll sort it out for you". There's a whole host of psychological reasons why this is the case, however ultimately ownership of improving how I feel at work has been passed to my manager and is out of my own hands. I have absented myself of any part in it, so I will sit and wait for my happiness to be fixed by my manager. It's a strange approach when you think about it and is unlike any other part of our lives, yet we spend more of our time at work than anywhere else...



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Trust individuals to know what they need to change.

The person who can best influence how we feel is the person who knows us best. Ourselves. In many non-directive counselling practices, counsellors will not offer advice or opinion, but rather respect the autonomy of the individual and their innate ability to find their own solutions. Developing self-efficacy is perhaps what organisations and managers should be focusing on - creating the belief and confidence in individuals that they can exercise influence over the events that affect their lives.

What if we give ownership and responsibility for how people feel at work equally to both the individuals and the organisation?

This approach may feel mind-blowing to some, it turns our instinct on its head but also stops employee engagement feeling like an annual tick box exercise and turns it into something really definable, something which can actually be positively affected by change.

Perhaps the concept of equal responsibility between an employee and the organisation is actually what organisations have been trying to achieve all along through internal coaching programmes? Maybe they just haven't been navigating the path in the right way...



The power of meaningful conversations and coaching

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Most individuals can pinpoint what's making them unhappy but generally they aren't clear on why, what they'd like to be different, what's possible, what they can do about it and what support they need.

If an employee could crystallise these thoughts and verbally express them in a conversation as part of a regular 1:1, or a casual chat opportunity between an employee and their line manager – it would turn that casual chat into a meaningful conversation, one that leads to some real positive change for the individual.

The problem is that most individuals don't know where and how to start. They can't quite put all the pieces of the jigsaw together and don't have the ability or self-discipline to take a constructive deep dive into their thoughts and understand why they are feeling a particular way and what's driving it. After all, isn't this why organisations spend thousands of pounds on executive coaching? Individuals often know how they feel, but coaching provides the reflective, structured space in which to consider the issue, the possible resolutions and the confidence to do something about it.

Without support, how can individuals properly understand and fix the issues they have about work? Unfortunately, due to the cost, coaching is often only provided to more senior managers or high performing talent. So how are the majority being heard?

A Sales Force study "The Impact of Equality and a Values Driven Business" found that employees who felt like their voices were being heard were 4x more likely to do their best work.

Internal coaching can play a part, but most managers are not experts in this area, lack the capability to coach well and individuals don't always feel comfortable talking to another person about personal issues. In expecting our managers to be coaches, have we placed too much expectation on them? Are they clear exactly what their role is and isn't?

Oracle reported in a 2020 study that 68% of employees would rather speak to a robot about stress and anxiety in the workplace than their line manager.

For employees who are not being heard by their line manager or through a robot, the result is issues that remain unfixed, a build-up of frustration, leading quickly into unhappiness and disengagement. At best this gets expressed through negative responses on an employee survey and at worst results in a day by day deterioration in motivation, self-confidence, mental health and of course productivity.

A new approach

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The world is evolving but employee engagement methodology hasn't moved on and is continuing to fail the majority of employees. Data taken from The Peakon Employee Survey data spanning 80 million survey responses across 160 countries and published in Jan 2020 reported that 41% of employees globally were engaged, 38% disengaged and 21% actively disengaged.

There is a clear need for a shift in approach and mindset to employee engagement, but to succeed leadership behaviours and the culture in which they exist need to change too. According to the Edelman Trust Barometer, 1 in 3 employees don't trust their employer.

The pandemic has shown how agile to change both organisations and individuals can be. It's time to enter a brave new world where:

- + Employee engagement isn't a data collection exercise where the voice of the individual is lost in the collective aggregation of the masses.
- + Employee engagement is recognised at individual level, where solutions to issues are tailored to the needs of the person.
- + Individuals are given the control of their own work happiness, along with the tools and the time to reflect on what is and isn't working and accountability to drive positive change for themselves.
- + The organisation gives line managers a clear remit to enable and support their people to reach a place where they are feeling the best versions of themselves at work.
- + Simple and effective coaching is available for everyone – not just the chosen few. This should be available remotely.

About Work-Happy

Work-Happy turns the traditional method of employee engagement on its head by giving the ownership of work happiness to the individual. Achieving happiness at work is challenging and to approach it on a mass scale at organisation, department or even team level means that the needs of each person as an individual can be missed. Work-Happy is a platform built by experts and works at the individual level, guiding employees to regularly reflect on how they are feeling about key areas of work, helping them to understand what is and isn't working and why. Work-Happy guides them to take accountability and drive positive change from within by committing to a series of small, achievable changes and supports them with a wealth of tools including an interactive coach bot and audio coaching.

Anna Cleland Founder – Work-Happy



Anna is passionate about building healthy relationships between organisations and their people so that both can thrive.

With 20 years experience in the HR consulting arena, Anna has worked with organisations to help them respond to the increasing need to understand, engage and look after their people to drive enhanced performance.

Anna brings challenge, ideas and creative thinking in the pursuit of creating happier, more productive and caring workplaces and is the founder of Work-Happy.

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We're ready to bring all the benefits of Work-Happy to your organisation. If you'd like to see a full demonstration or have a discussion about how it could work for you, we're ready for that too. Just pick up the phone or send us an email and let's talk.

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