Translating Employee Engagement Research into Practice

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Although a great deal has been learned about employee engagement over the last decade, engagement surveys continue to report the decline in engagement levels and the deepening disengagement among employees worldwide. It thus appears that organizations are not translating engagement research into practice. In this paper, I describe five barriers that make it difficult for organizations to translate employee engagement research into practice. In particular, organizations need to decide how to define engagement; the appropriate referent for engagement; how to measure engagement; the primary drivers of engagement; and the development of an organizational engagement strategy. Organizations that are able to overcome these barriers will be more likely to increase the engagement of their employees and reap the benefits of an engaged workforce.

In the last decade, there are have been so many papers and reports published on employee engagement that it has become near impossible to stay on top of what has become one of the most compelling if not the single most important issue in management research and practice in the last decade. This can be explained in large part due to the many claims of the impact of employee engagement on employee behavior and job performance as well as organizational performance in both the academic and practitioner literature.

In the practitioner literature, there are countless articles and reports on the benefits of an engaged workforce. With titles like, "Higher engagement equals better health: Study,", "Employers see link between engagement, business success", "Engagement linked to profits: Report", "Engagement drives bottom line," and "Engagement falling fast: Study", it is no wonder that employee engagement has become a high priority if not the top priority for organizations and the key to an organization's success, competitiveness, and effectiveness, not to mention the most important issue among senior-level HR professionals.

Indeed, research has found employee engagement to be associated with organizational-level outcomes such as higher shareholder returns, greater return on assets, shareholder value, profitability, productivity, and customer satisfaction. Engaged employees have more positive job attitudes, higher task, job, and contextual performance and organizational citizenship behavior, better health and well-being (e.g., lower anxiety, depression, and stress), and are less likely to quit. In addition, collective organizational engagement has also been found to be positively related to firm performance.

The practitioner literature is also full of reports linking employee engagement to financial performance including shareholder return, operating income, revenue growth, and profit margins that are nearly three times higher than organizations with disengaged employees. There are also reports linking engagement to lower absenteeism and job stress, and better health and overall well-being. Thus, among practitioners, it is well accepted that employee engagement has an impact on an organization's bottom line and is strongly related to business performance.

At the same time, we continue to read about falling engagement levels worldwide with close to fifty percent of organizations experiencing a decline along with the increasing number of global employees who are highly disengaged. Globally it has been reported that only 21 percent of employees are engaged. One report suggests that employee engagement is on the decline worldwide with the largest decline recorded in 15 years. It has also been reported that engagement levels across North America have hit a four-year low.

In combination, the link to business results along with the continuing decline of engagement and increasing levels of disengagement, continue to make employee engagement a high priority for organizations. But note the apparent paradox in these findings. After some ten years of research and

reports about the importance and effects of employee engagement, the many factors that drive it, and what organizations can do to improve it, it continues to decline. You would think that by now there would be evidence of an upward shift from disengaged to more engaged employees and workplaces.

Of course, there are many possible reasons for the decline, but what is especially hard to fathom is why after so many years of academic and practitioner research we have not seen a steady increase. One possible explanation might be the difficulty of making sense of and translating employee engagement research into practice. What makes the translation especially difficult is the proliferation of so much research in such a short period of time with relatively little attention to the meaning, measurement, and theory of employee engagement. As a result, making sense of employee engagement research is a difficult task that makes translating it into practice a major challenge that is full of obstacles and roadblocks.

The purpose of this paper is to identify the main barriers that make it difficult to translate employment engagement research into practice and to offer solutions to overcome these barriers. In particular, I will address the following barriers that organizations must overcome if they are to develop an effective strategy for developing a highly engaged workforce:

1. *The Engagement Definition Barrier*: What is employee engagement and how should we define it in our organization?
2. *The Engagement Referent Barrier*: What are the different referents for employee engagement and what referent should we focus on in our organization?
3. *The Engagement Measurement Barrier*: How do you measure employee engagement and how should we measure it in our organization?
4. *The Engagement Driver Barrier*: What are the main drivers of employee engagement and what drives engagement in our organization?
5. *The Engagement Strategy Barrier*: How can we develop an effective employee engagement strategy that will result in a highly engaged workforce?

Figure 1 presents a stage model which shows the five barriers in a sequential process that form the basis of this paper: the definition and meaning of employee engagement, the referent of engagement, the measurement of engagement, the drivers of engagement, and the engagement strategy. The barriers and main issues at each stage will be discussed along with potential solutions to overcome them. The main premise of this model is that failure to overcome the barriers at each stage of the process makes it difficult, if not impossible, for organizations to develop an effective employee engagement strategy that results in meaningful, substantive, and long-term benefits. Thus, it is imperative that each stage is successfully managed to successfully transition to the next stage.

THE ENGAGEMENT DEFINITION BARRIER

The first barrier that organizations confront is the very meaning of employee engagement. Many definitions of employee engagement have appeared in the academic and practitioner literatures and although there is some convergence among them, there remains a lack of agreement and consensus on its meaning and the very definition of engagement. While there have been differences from the start between the academic and practitioner perspective, there are also multiple definitions within each group. Thus, not only is there a lack of agreement between the practitioner and academic world, there is little agreement within each world.

In the practitioner literature, we often find definitions of engagement that refer to discretionary effort, job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and intent to stay. The Gallup measure of engagement defines engagement as conditions under which people work. Macey and Schneider have noted that practitioners often define engagement in terms of organizational commitment and it has been common to also define it as putting forth discretionary effort. In a report on employee engagement, The Conference Board defined employee engagement as a "heightened emotional and intellectual connection that an employee has for his/her job, organization, manager, or coworkers that, in turn, influences him/her to apply additional discretionary effort to his/her work."

In the academic literature, Kahn provided the first definition of engagement in his ethnographic study of personal engagement and disengagement. According to Kahn, engagement involves "the harnessing of organization members' selves to their work roles; in engagement, people employ and express themselves physically, cognitively, and emotionally during role performances." Thus, engagement is the "simultaneous employment and expression of a person's 'preferred self' in task behaviors that promote connections to work and to others, personal presence (physical, cogni-
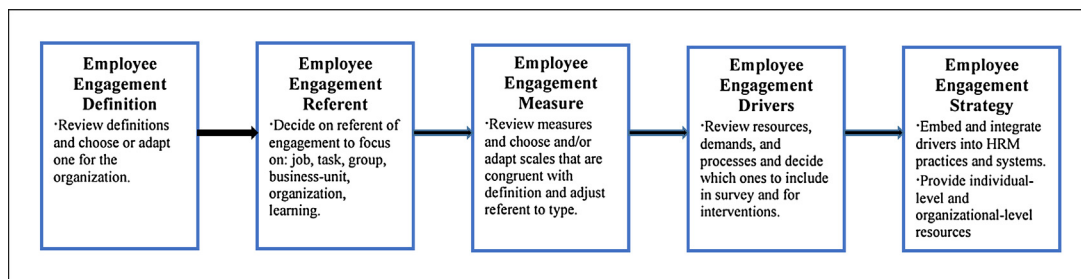

Employee Engagement Definition	Employee Engagement Referent	Employee Engagement Measure	Employee Engagement Drivers	Employee Engagement Strategy
·Review definitions and choose or adapt one for the organization.	·Decide on referent of engagement to focus on: job, task, group, business-unit, organization, learning.	·Review measures and choose and/or adapt scales that are congruent with definition and adjust referent to type.	·Review resources, demands, and processes and decide which ones to include in survey and for interventions.	·Embed and integrate drivers into HRM practices and systems. ·Provide individual-level and organizational-level resources

Figure 1 Stage Model of Employee Engagement Barriers