

Engaging the Federal Workforce: How To Do It & Prove It



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Executive Summary

The importance of fostering employee engagement within the Federal Government has been widely recognized, and the “people and culture” portion of the President’s Management Agenda emphasizes the need to develop and sustain an engaged, innovative, and productive Federal workforce. To address this goal, the U.S. Office of Personnel Management (OPM) has made employee engagement a priority in OPM’s Strategic Plan. This report summarizes OPM’s review of recent employee engagement research regarding definitions, models, measurement practices, and interventions. It also presents a definition of employee engagement as it specifically relates to the Federal workforce and a model of engagement that provides a practical perspective to measuring and improving employee engagement. Finally, some recent best practices used to drive sustainable employee engagement are highlighted.

While past research has identified several definitions of employee engagement, no commonly accepted definition currently exists. This lack of a common definition has made it difficult to identify the unique impact of employee engagement on key organizational drivers and outcomes. Without a shared definition of employee engagement, and ultimately a common model or framework explaining its relationship to other organizational variables, it will be difficult for the Federal community to systematically address specific areas of concern surrounding engagement or institute practices and interventions that foster engagement.

Employee Engagement Definition

OPM established a working group to develop a common definition of employee engagement. The group used a multi-step process that incorporated empirical research and feedback from key stakeholders and technical experts to achieve this goal. The methodology used to derive the definition is described in detail in this report. OPM’s definition of employee engagement is:

“The employee’s sense of purpose that is evident in their display of dedication, persistence, and effort in their work or overall attachment to their organization and its mission.”

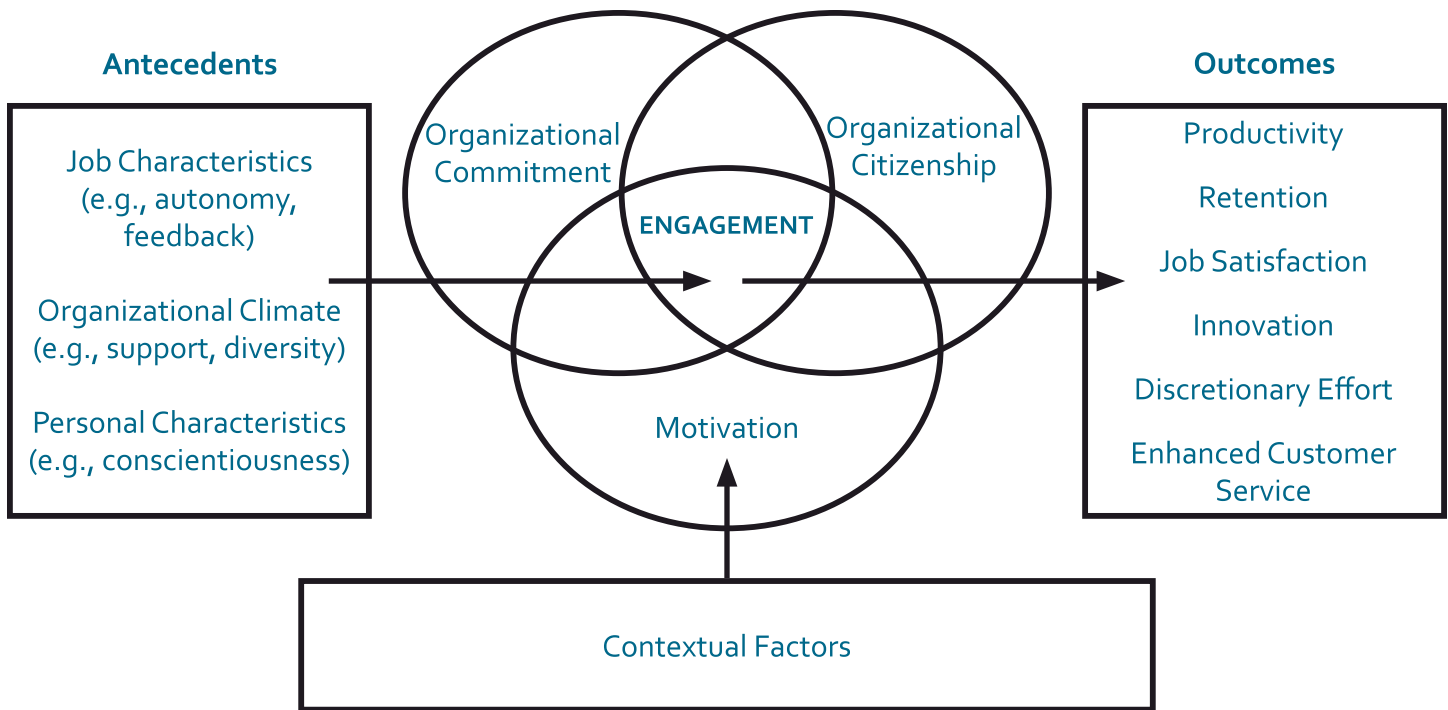
The implementation and use of this common definition will help ensure agencies are consistently promoting, fostering, and measuring the conditions that impact employee engagement.

Employee Engagement Model

OPM also developed a model of employee engagement to describe the key antecedents (e.g., job characteristics, organizational climate, and personal characteristics) and contextual factors (i.e., circumstances specific to Federal employees) that can influence employee engagement. The model also includes several outcomes of employee engagement. Employee engagement is related to many important individual and organizational outcomes including higher retention, increased innovation and productivity, and decreased absenteeism. It is also a strong predictor of both job satisfaction and organizational commitment (see page 2 for model).

“The employee’s sense of purpose that is evident in their display of dedication, persistence, and effort in their work or overall attachment to their organization and its mission.”





Measures of Employee Engagement

There is considerable variation in employee engagement measurement instruments. For the purpose of aligning the definition and model of engagement with an engagement measure, several scales are presented that include empirical acceptance and/or current use within agencies. In an effort to thoroughly target all areas of engagement, agencies should consider incorporating items into new and existing organizational assessments that measure the antecedents and contextual factors impacting engagement, as indicated in the proposed model. Items that directly measure engagement itself, as indicated by the definition (e.g., dedication, persistence and effort) should be considered as well.

Interventions and Best Practices

Finally, several best practices are presented to highlight specific actions agencies can take to sustain and improve engagement. Research has heavily emphasized the role of leaders at all levels in facilitating and increasing employee engagement, and leadership training is a common recommendation for facilitating employee engagement. Recommended training often includes proven management practices, opportunities for self-awareness exercises, coaching, and real-time feedback.

Effective performance management practices are also linked to enhancing employee engagement. Major performance management activities related to engagement include setting performance and development goals, providing ongoing feedback, and building a climate of trust and empowerment. Agencies can also foster engagement through their job design and selection efforts, and promoting a culture of diversity and inclusion.



Introduction

In recent years, the importance of fostering employee engagement within the Federal Government has been recognized among researchers and agencies. For example, one study found that engaged public sector employees are: (1) twice as likely to stay in their current jobs, (2) two-and-a-half times more likely to feel they can make a difference, and (3) three times as likely to report being satisfied in their jobs (Taylor, 2012). Further, as highlighted in the “people and culture” portion of the President’s Management Agenda, the need to unlock the talent of today’s workforce and build the workforce needed for the future is paramount. To address this goal, and more specifically a culture of excellence, the U.S. Office of Personnel Management (OPM) has made employee engagement a priority.

Specifically, Goal 6 of OPM’s Strategic Plan has been set forth to “provide leadership in helping agencies create inclusive work environments where a diverse Federal workforce is fully engaged and energized to put forth its best effort, achieve their agency’s mission, and remain committed to public service.” The following strategies have been established to achieve this goal:

SGo6.01: Design and deliver leadership training to increase employee engagement

SGo6.02: Support agencies in hiring leaders strong in managing and leading high performing organizations

SGo6.03: Provide a comprehensive suite of engagement services and models for agencies and employees

SGo6.04: Ensure agencies target, address, and measure key drivers of employee engagement

SGo6.05: Partner with agencies to drive greater diversity, inclusion, and employee engagement

This report summarizes OPM’s review of recent employee engagement research regarding definitions, models, measurement practices, and interventions. It then presents a definition of employee engagement as it specifically relates to the Federal workforce and a model of engagement that provides a practical approach to measuring and improving employee engagement. Finally, the report highlights recent best practices used to drive sustainable employee engagement.



Definition

Although past research has proposed several definitions of employee engagement, the definitions have varied widely among researchers. This is due in part to the fact that engagement has only recently begun to distinguish itself from more established organizational attributes such as job satisfaction, organizational satisfaction, and organizational commitment, making it difficult to identify its unique impact on key organizational drivers and outcomes. Additionally, employee engagement overlaps with other psychological constructs (e.g., organizational commitment).

In a thorough review of engagement research, Christian, Garza, and Slaughter (2011) stated that engagement is the extent to which individuals invest their “full selves” in the execution of their work. This person-centric view is one example of how engagement has begun to differentiate itself from the traditional concepts of organizational commitment, motivation, and job involvement. Similarly, some of the recent research on engagement appears to be converging on definitions that include cognitive, emotional, and behavioral components that are associated with individual role performance.

Without a shared definition of employee engagement, and ultimately a common model or framework explaining its relationship to other organizational attributes, it will be difficult for the Federal community to systematically address specific areas of concern surrounding engagement or institute practices and interventions that foster engagement.

While past research has identified several definitions that have attempted to capture the distinguishing and unique components of employee engagement, no commonly accepted definition currently exists. According to Serrano and Reichard (2011), the

most significant conceptualizations of engagement include the following: (1) Kahn’s (1990) original definition regarding the “preferred self” resulting from a sense of personal safety and availability while believing in the meaningfulness of the task; (2) Maslach, Schaufeli, and Leiter’s (2001) antithesis to burnout; (3) Schaufeli, Salanova, Gonzalez-Roma, and Bakker’s (2002) extension to an independent three-component construct that includes vigor, dedication, and absorption, and finally; (4) Shirom’s (2004) concept of vigor.

Kahn (1990) described employee engagement as being “the harnessing of organization members’ selves to their work roles; in engagement, people employ and express themselves physically, cognitively, and emotionally during role performances” (p. 694). His conceptualization was largely influenced by sociological literature that discussed how employees express themselves in their work role and can incorporate their full identity into that role. Later, burnout researchers modified this idea, defining engagement as the opposite or positive antithesis of burnout (Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001). Some research has found that the core dimensions of burnout (exhaustion and cynicism) and engagement (vigor and dedication; vigor being akin to energy and dedication to involvement) are opposites (Gonzalez-Roma, Schaufeli, Bakker, & Lloret, 2006).

According to Maslach et al. (2001), engagement is characterized by energy, involvement, and efficacy, the direct opposite of the three burnout dimensions of exhaustion, cynicism, and inefficacy. Further, Schaufeli et al. (2002) defined engagement as “a persistent and positive affective-motivational state of fulfillment in employees, characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption” (p. 74). Lastly, Macey, Schneider, Barbera, and Young (2009), considering much of the available research to date, defined engagement as “an individual’s purpose and focused energy, evident to others in the display of personal

A common definition of employee engagement is a necessary prerequisite to a common understanding of what employee engagement is and determining what the Federal Government can do to foster, increase, and measure employee engagement in its workforce.



initiative, adaptability, effort, and persistence directed towards organizational goals” (p. 7).

It is important to recognize that definitions have described engagement at either the job or organizational level (Saks, 2006). For example, Kahn (1990) described engagement as performance in one’s role or task. At the organizational level, Robinson, Perryman, and Hayday (2004) emphasized the organizational aspect of engagement as “a positive attitude held by the employee towards the organization and its values” (p. 9).

OPM’s Definition of Employee Engagement

A common definition of employee engagement is a necessary prerequisite to a common understanding of what employee engagement is and determining what the Federal Government can do to foster, increase, and measure employee engagement in its workforce. Given the need for a common definition of employee engagement, OPM established a working group to achieve this goal.

OPM’s working group used a multi-step process to identify an appropriate definition of employee engagement. The working group, comprised of representatives from key employee engagement stakeholder groups across OPM, met to discuss the overall goal and purpose of the employee engagement definition. Existing definitions being used within the working groups’ respective areas were collected and documented. The working group identified components of the various definitions to be considered for inclusion in the final definition. These components included a measurability factor, elements of diversity and inclusion, and emotional commitment. The group discussed the current definitions and their respective ability to support a broad range of engagement-related activities and initiatives. Members determined that while these definitions were acceptable, there was some

uncertainty around how most of the definitions were derived and/or whether they were robust enough to encompass a full range of engagement-related activities. The working group also reviewed the empirical literature to identify additional definitions of employee engagement. Those definitions were added to the list of operational definitions already identified. These activities resulted in a comprehensive list of engagement definitions.

The identified operational and empirical definitions (10 in all) were next presented and discussed at a bi-weekly OPM Strategic Goal Six meeting. The Goal Six owners (a group of OPM Senior Executives) reviewed the definitions and requested additional input from all OPM research psychologists. The purpose of this action was to gather feedback and ensure that the initial information gathering process identified all relevant definitions of engagement. Psychologists across OPM (68 in all) were asked via email to review the existing definitions and identify those they perceived to be especially credible or noteworthy. They were also asked to provide any additional definitions that were not listed in the pre-generated definition list provided to them. See Table 1 for the proposed definitions sent to the OPM psychologists.

Feedback was provided by 25 OPM psychologists and the definitions that best reflected the psychologists’ understanding of engagement and/or definitions that best differentiated engagement from other organizational variables (e.g., organizational commitment) were identified. Common or reoccurring components within the definitions were also identified. Following this activity, the Strategic Goal Six owners were presented with the original 10 definitions and the three most frequently cited definitions (based on OPM psychologists review). These definitions were:

1. A heightened connection between employees and their work, their organization, or the people they work for or with (U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, 2008)



2. The extent to which employees feel passionate about their jobs, are committed to the organization, and put discretionary effort into their work (Byrne, 2014; "What is Employee Engagement?," 2014)
3. The employee's sense of purpose and focused energy that is evident to others through the display of personal initiative, adaptability, effort, and persistence directed toward the organization's goals (Macey & Schneider, 2008)

The Goal Six owners were also provided with the common components present in the top three definitions. These common components were:

1. A behavioral component that was most directly tied to discretionary effort, intense dedication or absorption in the job; demonstrated by "going above and beyond;"
2. An attitudinal or affective component comprised of energy, vigor, or passion for the job or task;
3. A cognitive component reflecting each employee's understanding of both the job's demands and the work group's strategy.

The Goal Six owners determined that any of the top 3 definitions could be well suited, but they did not have a preference for any particular definition so additional input from all OPM research psychologists was requested.

OPM psychologists were asked to provide specific feedback on the top three definitions and identify any additional common components pertinent to the final definition. The process for deriving the top three definitions was explained and input on the most preferred definition was gathered and discussed. There was general agreement that the definition of engagement should be comprised of the behavioral, attitudinal, and cognitive components discussed above. The OPM psychologists discussed the cognitive component to

ensure a common understanding and subsequently described it as a heightened connection or sense of purpose to work, work tasks, organization, and/or the organizational mission.

Based on the psychologists' suggestions, the working group derived two hybrid definitions intended to capture the behavioral, attitudinal, and cognitive components. These hybrid definitions were:

1. A heightened connection between an employee and their work, organization, and/or organization's mission characterized by dedication and commitment
2. The employee's sense of purpose that is evident in their display of dedication, persistence and effort in their work or overall attachment to their organization and its mission

The Strategic Goal Six owners reviewed these two definitions and selected the following definition:

Employee engagement is the employee's sense of purpose that is evident in their display of dedication, persistence, and effort in their work or overall attachment to their organization and its mission.

Employee engagement is viewed here as a positive condition that benefits the organization. The focus for agencies, therefore, is to implement and foster conditions that increase engagement, and ultimately, impact key organizational drivers of success.

Employee engagement is the employee's sense of purpose that is evident in their display of dedication, persistence, and effort in their work or overall attachment to their organization and its mission.



Table 1
Employee Engagement Definitions

| Job or work-focused employee engagement definitions | Federal employee engagement definition | Organizational-focused employee engagement definitions |
|---|---|---|
| <p>1. A positive, fulfilling, work related state of mind characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption (Schaufeli et al., 2002)</p> <p>2. Work engagement is a relatively enduring state of mind referring to the simultaneous investment of personal energies in the experience or performance of work (Christian et al., 2011)</p> <p>3. Employees' investment of physical, cognitive, and emotional energy and their full deployment of themselves into their work roles or tasks (Kahn, 1990)</p> <p>4. Engaged employees know what is expected of them, have opportunities to feel an impact and fulfillment in their work, [and] perceive that they are part of something significant with co-workers whom they trust (Harter, Schmidt, & Hayes, 2002)</p> | <p>5. A heightened connection between employees and their work, their organization, or the people they work for or with (U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, 2008)</p> | <p>6. The employee's sense of purpose and focused energy that is evident to others through the display of personal initiative, adaptability, effort, and persistence directed toward the organization's goals (Macey & Schneider, 2008)</p> <p>7. Having a deep and broad connection with the company that results in the willingness to go above and beyond what is expected to help the company succeed (Gebauer & Lowman, 2008)</p> <p>8. Engagement is the extent to which employees commit to something or someone in their organization and how hard they work and how long they stay as a result of that commitment (Corporate Leadership Council, 2004)</p> <p>9. The extent to which employees feel passionate about their jobs, are committed to the organization, and put discretionary effort into their work ("What is Employee Engagement?," 2014)</p> <p>10. The emotional commitment the employee has to the organization and its goals. This emotional commitment means engaged employees actually care about their work and their company (Kruse, 2012)</p> |



Proposed Model

A common understanding of employee engagement will help ensure agencies target, address, and measure key drivers of employee engagement (OPM SGo6.04); design and deliver leadership training to increase employee engagement (OPM SGo6.01); and offer a comprehensive suite of engagement services and models for agencies and employees (OPM SGo6.03). A model of employee engagement that identifies and further explains its underlying components, antecedents, and outcomes is described below.

While employee engagement has begun to distinguish itself from other organizational attributes there is still substantial overlap because many of the characteristics that define employee engagement are included in other organizational variables. This overlap is not surprising because many traditional organizational variables share at least some characteristics. Figure 1 uses a classic Venn diagram to depict the overlapping nature of three well established work place variables (organizational commitment, organizational citizenship, and motivation) and employee engagement. As shown in Figure 1, employee engagement encompasses aspects of one's overall commitment to the organization, organizational citizenship (e.g., discretionary behavior that goes beyond job duties) and general motivation. In this model of engagement, then, employee engagement can manifest itself in a variety of ways.

The affective and cognitive components of engagement are likely to be most easily observed in organizational commitment behaviors because organizational commitment refers to the extent to which an employee feels a sense of allegiance to his or her job, organization, or both. There are three main components of organizational commitment: (1) affective commitment, or the emotional

connection; (2) normative commitment, or the sense of obligation to stay with the organization; and (3) continuance commitment, or the perceived costs of leaving the organization. Commitment may also manifest itself as a strong sense of identity and commitment to a career or occupation, especially for careers in which significant effort and time was spent establishing one's professional reputation. Similarly, in cases where employees regularly work in teams, individuals may demonstrate commitment or loyalty to the team.

The behavioral component of employee engagement can be readily observed in organizational citizenship behaviors. Organizational citizenship includes behavior that contributes to the overall welfare of the organization and goes beyond required job duties.

The behavioral component of employee engagement can be readily observed in organizational citizenship behaviors. Organizational citizenship includes behavior that contributes to the overall welfare of the organization and goes beyond required job duties. Organizational citizenship behavior, or extra-role behavior, is typically manifested by accepting additional duties and assignments that are considered discretionary. Employees who are more engaged in their work are also less likely to engage in counterproductive work behavior such as theft, substance abuse, and workplace violence (Kish-Gephart, Harrison, & Treviño, 2010).

The affective, cognitive and behavioral components of employee engagement are likely to be observed in the very broad category of behaviors most commonly called motivation. Motivation can be described as a set of energetic forces that originate within, as well as beyond, an individual's being to initiate work-related behavior and to determine its form, direction, intensity, and duration (Pinder, 1998). This definition explains that employees may be motivated intrinsically (i.e., from within) or extrinsically (i.e., by external factors such as pay, benefits, or rewards), indicating that there are numerous types of motivators, and an individual's level of motivation and reason for motivation can vary widely. Intrinsic motivation might be thought of as reflecting traits, or personal temperament dispositions, while extrinsic motivation might reflect



states, or temporary interventions that raise (or lower) an individual's tendency to act. This leads to a distinction between trait-based engagement and state-based engagement. Macey and Schneider (2008) regard trait engagement as a disposition (e.g., proactive personality) or one's inclination to experience the world from a particular vantage point (i.e., characterized by positive views about life and work). State engagement is related to psychological affect (i.e., moods and emotions) and can be conceptualized by feelings of energy and absorption. State engagement is likely to fluctuate over time (e.g., hour-to-hour or day-to-day) and be observed when an employee is engaged on some occasions and disengaged on others (Dalal, Brummel, Wee and Thomas, 2008).

Collectively, organizational commitment, organizational citizenship, and motivation contribute to employee engagement, which may or may not be directly observable in the work of employees. Because employee engagement has a cognitive, emotional and behavioral component (Shuck & Wollard, 2010), evidence of engagement may manifest itself in many forms, including extra-role behavior, feelings of commitment, and/or generally positive views of life and work (Macey & Schneider, 2008).

Antecedents

Identifying the antecedents of employee engagement is fundamental to determining what leads to high or low employee engagement, and ultimately, the actions organizations may take to increase engagement. The antecedents included in Figure 1 show that job characteristics, organizational climate, and personal characteristics contribute uniquely to levels of employee engagement. These antecedents have also

Identifying the antecedents of employee engagement is fundamental to determining what leads to high or low employee engagement, and ultimately, the actions organizations may take to increase engagement.

been linked to organizational outcomes such as job satisfaction and intentions to quit (Saks, 2006).

Job Characteristics. The nature of one's work or job has been found to be directly related to engagement (Hackman & Oldham, 1980) and motivation (Fried & Ferris, 1987). According to Christian et al. (2011), this antecedent can be divided into three categories that include motivational and social characteristics. Motivational characteristics associated with engagement include autonomy (freedom to carry out one's work), task variety (performing different tasks in a job), feedback (extent to which a job provides performance information), and job complexity (extent to which a job is multifaceted and difficult to perform). Social characteristics include an overall support mechanism in which a job provides opportunities for assistance and advice from supervisors and coworkers. Finally, job fit is an important consideration and implies the degree to which an employee feels their personality and values aligns with their current job (Resick, Baltes, & Shantz, 2007). A good job fit is one in which an individual can derive meaning from his or her work, develop positive work-related attitudes, and likely perform the job with enthusiasm and energy (Shuck & Rocco, 2011).

Organizational Climate. Organizational climate includes aspects of the work environment that can influence employee behavior. For example, perceived organizational support has been found to be related to engagement at both the job and organizational level (Saks, 2006). Other aspects of the organizational climate found to be related to engagement include transformational leadership (Judge & Piccolo, 2004), social support (Crawford, LePine, & Rich, 2010), work conditions (May, Gilson, & Harter, 2004; Humphrey, Nahrgang, & Morgeson, 2007), rewards (Maslach et al., 2001) and inclusive diversity climate (Volpone, Avery, & McKay, 2012).



Transformational leadership refers to a leader engaging in relationship-building and relationship maintaining behaviors with their direct reports rather than primarily focusing on task requirements (DeRue, Nahrgang, Wellman, & Humphrey, 2011). Social support and work conditions refer to building collegial social networks to share experiences, identify resources, and buffer the network's members against both routine and unanticipated stressors at work (Crawford et al., 2010; May et al., 2004; Humphrey et al., 2007). Inclusive diversity climate refers to performance management practices that: 1) are fair and impartial to all demographic groups, and 2) reflect higher-quality manager-direct report relationships. Inclusive diversity climates typically lead to higher measured engagement among traditional minority employees (Volpone et al., 2012). Strenuous physical demands and poor working conditions (e.g., health hazards, temperature, and noise) are more likely to result in negative experiences while at work, thereby decreasing engagement (Humphrey et al., 2007).

Personal Characteristics. Kahn (1990) suggested that dispositional individual differences are likely to influence an employee's tendencies towards engagement. Traits such as conscientiousness, positive affect, and proactive personality have been found to be related to engagement (Christian et al., 2011). Proactive personality is demonstrated by individuals who exude initiative, perseverance, and immersion of themselves in their work (Christian et al., 2011).

Contextual Factors

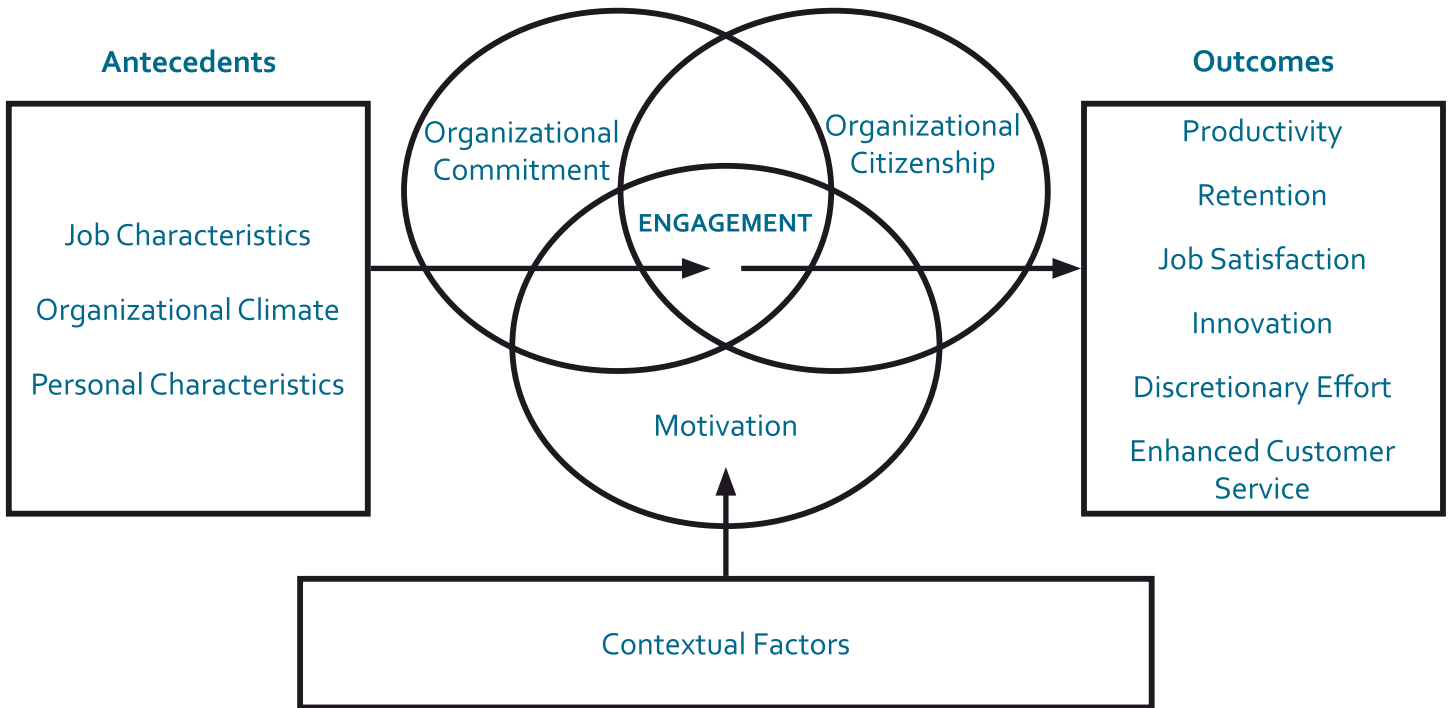
When considering a model of employee engagement, it is important to carefully consider the context in which the work occurs. The Federal Government is a unique work environment because Federal employees are typically driven more by a sense of altruism and commitment to public service than by financial incentives (Trahant, 2009). Other positive contextual factors that Federal employees' experience, such as job security and better benefits, may also positively affect engagement. Additionally, the General Schedule (GS) pay schedule, unique to the Federal Government, may increase engagement for lower tenured employees by allowing them to attain high steps within their pay grades (Trahant, 2009). Conversely, the Federal Government's fiscal environment is difficult to predict and some fiscal contextual factors are beyond the employee's and leader's control; budget uncertainty is one example, which, in recent years, has resulted in continuing resolutions, sequestration, and furloughs. An organizational climate with these kinds of uncertainty has the potential to undermine employee engagement efforts. Therefore, when targeting employee engagement, it is essential to consider external factors in addition to those that may be influenced by leadership and the individual.

“The Federal Government is a unique work environment because Federal employees are typically driven more by a sense of altruism and commitment to public service than by financial incentives” - Trahant, 2009



Figure 1. Model of Employee Engagement

Employee engagement is the employee's sense of purpose that is evident in their display of dedication, persistence, and effort in their work or overall attachment to their organization and its mission



Variations in Measures of Employee Engagement

As a developing concept, there is currently considerable variation in the measurement of employee engagement. While measuring specific facets of engagement (vigor, discretionary effort, etc.) is critical for interpreting results and drawing accurate conclusions, Griffith (2009) correctly noted “when comparing items from the measuring instruments, it can at times seem as though one is measuring two completely different constructs” (p. 27). Thus, while two different scales can both be titled “engagement,” they might not actually be measuring the same construct. Additionally, this inconsistency in what’s being measured is exacerbated by the fact that some current measures of engagement assess the antecedents that lead to engagement (e.g., rewards and recognition) as opposed to the employee’s sense of engagement.

Many of the existing measures of engagement also tend to treat work as a unified entity. In other words, the scales do not differentiate between work tasks. This tendency is potentially limiting because it is easy to conceive of an employee who is fully immersed in and passionate about one project, but completely disaffected with another.



Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey. OPM's current measure of employee engagement is the Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey (FEVS) Employee Engagement Index (see index items listed below). The FEVS is administered each year and measures employee engagement through a subset of 15 items, captured by three factors: Leaders Lead (e.g., "In my organization, senior leaders generate high levels of motivation and commitment in the workforce."), Supervisors (e.g., "My supervisor treats me with respect."), and Intrinsic Work Experiences (e.g., "My work gives me a feeling of personal accomplishment."). Perceptions of these factors are antecedents of engagement. Thus, they do not directly measure the level of engagement within an organization. For example, "Leaders Lead" and "Supervisors" resemble measures of organizational climate while "Intrinsic Work Experiences" primarily measures facets of job fit.

Leaders Lead

- 53. In my organization, senior leaders generate high levels of motivation and commitment in the workforce.
- 54. My organization's senior leaders maintain high standards of honesty and integrity.
- 56. Managers communicate the goals and priorities of the organization.
- 60. Overall, how good a job do you feel is being done by the manager directly above your immediate supervisor?
- 61. I have a high level of respect for my organization's senior leaders.

Supervisor

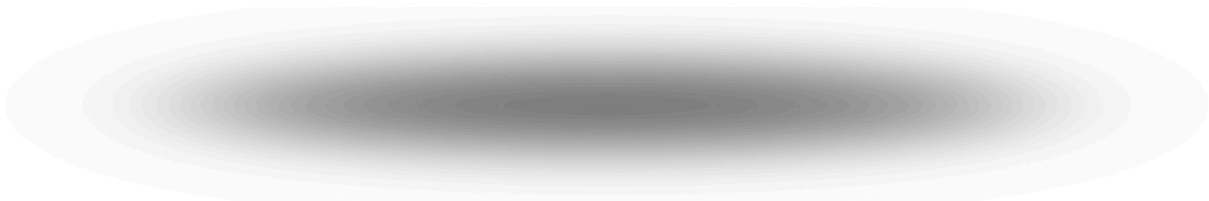
- 47. Supervisors in my work unit support employee development.
- 48. My supervisor listens to what I have to say.
- 49. My supervisor treats me with respect.
- 51. I have trust and confidence in my supervisor.
- 52. Overall, how good a job do you feel is being done by your immediate supervisor?

Intrinsic Work Experiences

- 3. I feel encouraged to come up with new and better ways of doing things.
- 4. My work gives me a feeling of personal accomplishment.
- 6. I know what is expected of me on the job.
- 11. My talents are used well in the workplace.
- 12. I know how my work relates to the agency's goals and priorities.



The Employee Engagement Index focuses heavily on leadership behaviors because strong leaders are important to creating a positive organizational climate. Strong leaders also tend to possess the ability to communicate goals and priorities (cognitive portion of engagement), motivate employees (leading to behaviors), establish trust, enforce contingencies for exceptional and unacceptable behavior, and generate commitment. Leadership can also influence intrinsic work experiences by gathering ideas and communicating expectations and feedback. The degree to which one feels a connection to the job being performed can be enhanced or diminished by the leader's ability to effectively communicate job expectations, give performance feedback, and/or provide the opportunity for employees to be involved in decisions that impact their work.



Utrecht Work Engagement Scale. Perhaps the most widely used engagement measure is the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES) developed by Schaufeli et al. (2002). The UWES items are listed below. This scale consists of three factors: (1) vigor, characterized by energy, resilience, and effort; (2) dedication, related to inspiration, pride, and enthusiasm; and (3) absorption, typified by immersion in one's work and intense concentration.

Vigor

1. At my work, I feel bursting with energy.
2. At my job, I feel strong and vigorous.
3. When I get up in the morning, I feel like going to work.
4. I can continue working for very long periods at a time.
5. At my job, I am very resilient, mentally.
6. At my work I always persevere, even when things do not go well.

Dedication

1. I find the work that I do full of meaning and purpose.
2. I am enthusiastic about my job.
3. My job inspires me.
4. I am proud of the work that I do.
5. To me, my job is challenging.

Absorption

1. Time flies when I'm working.
2. When I am working, I forget everything else around me.
3. I feel happy when I am working intensely.
4. I am immersed in my work.
5. I get carried away when I'm working.
6. It is difficult to detach myself from my job.





The UWES cannot be readily equated to the FEVS Employee Engagement Index because the items are very different. The UWES represents a state engagement measure, and the FEVS focuses on antecedents to engagement (Macey & Schneider, 2008). In other words, the UWES focuses on particular mindsets and emotions, while the FEVS items mainly represent aspects of the organization, such as leadership and supervision. The factor of the FEVS Employee Engagement Index most similar to the UWES is Intrinsic Work Experiences, which focuses on the employee's job.

Gallup Q12™ Survey (Gallup, 2013). Similar to the FEVS, Gallup's Q12™ survey evaluates employees' perceptions of workplace characteristics, which makes it a measure of engagement antecedents instead of state engagement. The proprietary Q12™ is a single-factor scale based on decades of focus groups and quantitative data analyses that revealed certain attributes were consistently found in productive workgroups. Examples of these attributes include employees being aware of expectations and having opportunities for growth (Harter et al., 2002).



Engagement Assessment (Rich, LePine, & Crawford, 2010). Measures can appear to be limited when they do not differentiate between the physical, mental, and emotional resources of an employee. When Kahn (1990) originally conceptualized engagement, he thought of an engaged employee as someone who could invest one, two, or all three of these aspects of the self into one's job. Measuring all three separately can help clarify what parts of the individual are connected to the job. Rich, LePine, and Crawford (2010) provided one example of an engagement assessment that captures these parts of the concept (items are listed below).

Physical Engagement

1. I work with intensity on my job.
2. I exert my full effort to my job.
3. I devote a lot of energy to my job.
4. I try my hardest to perform well on my job.
5. I strive as hard as I can to complete my job.
6. I exert a lot of energy on my job.

Emotional Engagement

1. I am enthusiastic in my job.
2. I feel energetic at my job.
3. I am interested in my job.
4. I am proud of my job.
5. I feel positive about my job.
6. I am excited about my job.

Cognitive Engagement

1. At work, my mind is focused on my job.
2. At work, I pay a lot of attention to my job.
3. At work, I focus a great deal of attention on my job.
4. At work, I am absorbed by my job.
5. At work, I concentrate on my job.
6. At work, I devote a lot of attention to my job.



When deciding how to measure engagement, one main factor to consider is whether to focus on the antecedents of engagement, to measure engagement directly, or to attempt both. The benefit of antecedent scales like the FEVS Employee Engagement Index and the Q12™ is that it's easier to observe characteristics of the workplace than it is to observe an employee's thoughts and feelings. Thus, it's easier to translate results from these antecedent scales into action. However, as Macey and Schneider (2008) articulated, "such measures require an inferential leap to engagement rather than assessing engagement itself. This has practical significance because the advice the practitioner offers management on addressing engagement issues requires a similar inferential leap" (p. 8). In other words, the FEVS and Q12 are limited in that one must assume that the workplace characteristics being measured actually influence engagement, and in some circumstances this may not be the case. State engagement measures like the UWES and the engagement assessment by Rich et al. (2010) do not require such an assumption but the results may be harder to translate into action.

To thoroughly address engagement, agencies must consider the antecedents of engagement and the contextual factors impacting engagement as well as engagement itself. Each of these components plays an important role in driving the increase in organizational effectiveness associated with highly engaged employees and measuring their impact. The FEVS Employee Engagement Index provides an example of antecedents to consider. In addition to these antecedents, consideration of contextual factors within and outside the organization, such as the recent Federal pay freezes, will help determine how such conditions might differentially affect levels of engagement and where to focus efforts. Future iterations of the FEVS should also consider including items that more directly measure employee engagement itself such as those used to predict state engagement.

"To thoroughly address engagement, agencies must consider the antecedents of engagement and the contextual factors impacting engagement as well as engagement itself. Each of these components plays an important role in driving the increase in organizational effectiveness associated with highly engaged employees and measuring their impact. "



Employee Lifecycle and Federal Workforce

An additional factor to consider when assessing employee engagement is the employee lifecycle. The employee lifecycle begins when the employee comes on board and ends when the employee leaves the organization. Research by Watson Wyatt Worldwide (2008, 2009) found that employee engagement typically starts high (at the point of hiring) and declines with tenure—dropping 9 percent in the first year and more than 12 percent over five years. However, there are many opportunities such as onboarding, goal setting, performance feedback and career discussions, where leaders can engage employees and strengthen employee commitment and alignment (Trahan, 2009). Conversely, the level of engagement may wane as employees experience setbacks in their career (e.g., job reassignment), events occur within the organization (e.g., Reduction in Force), or events occur outside the organization (e.g., sequestration). Events external to the organizational environment may also include non-work related personal events, such as relocation of a spouse, birth of a child, or illness of a loved one. Thus, while leaders may strive to maintain a highly engaged workforce, it is important to recognize that employee engagement is not entirely within the control of the organization or individual and is likely to fluctuate during the employee lifecycle. Thus, engagement should be evaluated in the context of the employee's lifecycle.

Interventions and Best Practices

To promote high levels of engagement, it is imperative for agencies to develop specific initiatives and institute best practices. Engagement programs and interventions should be designed and implemented based on the unique needs of an agency and its workforce. Managers at all levels should strive to leverage opportunities to collaborate with employees, both formally and informally. To develop effective engagement

strategies, senior leadership should collaborate with agency human resources teams to determine specific engagement priorities and develop a strategy for effective long-term employee engagement and retention. According to Trahan (2009), such strategies should also be embedded into an agency's strategic human capital planning process and reviewed and revised based on changing employee needs, workforce requirements, and organizational priorities.

Leadership Training

Research has heavily emphasized the role of leaders at all levels (e.g., executives, managers, and supervisors) in facilitating and increasing employee engagement. As highlighted by Harter et al. (2002), an employee's manager can strongly influence levels of employee engagement and discretionary effort. Similarly, Harter, Schmidt, Asplund, Killham, and Agrawal's (2010) study showed that managerial actions (e.g., clarifying employee expectations) can help boost job satisfaction and ultimately improve outcomes at the organizational level. Leaders play a key role in shaping employees' actual and perceived work environment, allocating resources and rewards, and driving the pace and volume of work (Christian et al., 2011; Kelloway & Barling, 2010). The term "leaders" in this context refers to the individuals who have authority, commonly assigned through a formal position, to influence group members and move them toward a common organizational goal (Serrano & Reichard, 2011). Leadership training often takes the form of formal development via classroom training and/or coaching that focuses on proven management practices. Research has suggested that employee engagement training for leaders should also provide opportunities for increasing self-reflection and self-awareness via a 360-feedback instrument and coaching. Lastly, these programs should build skills around active listening, providing real-time feedback, and identifying opportunities for employee involvement. Serrano and Reichard (2011) identified several "best practice" strategies and actions for managers wishing to build and maintain employee engagement (see Table 2).



Table 2
 Strategies and Recommended Actions for Managers to Create an Engaged Workforce

| Engagement Area | Recommended Manager Actions |
|--|---|
| Design meaningful and motivating work | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explain the ties between employee actions and organizational and business unit vision • Re-design work to increase job resources (e.g., job control, autonomy, access to information, feedback and coaching, and innovative climate) |
| Support and coach employees | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide individual coaching for employee development and to increase human capital • Enforce performance management-based contingencies but be supportive, not dismissive or overly critical |
| Enhance employee personal resources | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide or identify job resources such as training or equipment • Provide or identify employee resources such as wellness programs, continuing non-work-related education, or support programs (e.g., weight control, public speaking, elder care) |
| Facilitate the development of co-worker professional relationships | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Build a culture of trust • Encourage frequent communication among employees • Model appropriate co-worker relationships (e.g., attending social functions and joining in on social outings) |

Source: Serrano and Reichard (2011)



Additionally, OPM has created a suite of employee engagement tools to help leaders promote an organizational culture of engagement (<http://crew.www.opm.gov/maximizeengagement/>). The suite includes a web-based application that provides specific strategies supervisors, managers, and executives can implement for themselves and for their teams to create an engaging environment. The suite also includes several tips and strategies supervisors, managers, and executives can implement to create and sustain a culture of engagement. Many of these strategies are relatively easy to adopt and implementing these or similar ideas could have a positive influence on engagement. The suite of employee engagement tools also includes a web-based training course and materials to implement an instructor-led training course.

Performance Management Practices

In addition to leadership training in which feedback and rewards are often heavily emphasized, evidence suggests specific performance management practices can enhance employee engagement. This includes creating opportunities for employees to work in roles in which their knowledge, skills, and abilities fit with their job responsibilities (i.e., job fit), creating and supporting a positive psychological climate, and providing opportunities for employees to emotionally connect with their organization (Kahn, 1990). Strong performance management practices also address issues involving contingencies for poor performance as well as rewards for exceptional performance.

Interestingly, in one comparison between agencies with low and high engagement, the most differentiating factor between them was more effective and widely used performance management practices (Lavigna, 2014). These practices included employee development opportunities, linking the employee's job with the organization's mission or strategic goals, opportunities for feedback, and rewards and recognition. Table 3 displays performance management practices and corresponding manager behaviors associated with driving employee engagement.

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Table 3
Performance Management Activities of Engagement

| Performance Management Activity | Manager Behaviors Associated with Driving Employee Engagement |
|---|---|
| Setting performance and development goals | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Jointly set goals with employee • Help employees understand how their work supports the overall company strategy and direction |
| Providing ongoing feedback and recognition | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide satisfactory amount of recognition • Provide feedback that helps improve performance |
| Managing employee development | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide sufficient opportunities for training • Support career development efforts • Conduct career-planning discussions |
| Conducting mid-year and year-end appraisals | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conduct an effective performance appraisal discussion by including objectivity, transparency, and employee input |
| Building a climate of trust and empowerment with employees | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encourage employees to be innovative and creative • Encourage employees to improve work processes and productivity • Value ideas and opinions • Treat employees fairly and respectfully • Provide the resources and decision-making authority to perform effectively • Provide control over the quality of work • Act on needs and concerns • Ensure that processes are in place to collect feedback and that managers are trained to encourage differing viewpoints |
| Focusing the employee on customer service at all levels of the customer | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communicate how the results of their work impact downstream stakeholders or “consumers” of specific Government services and programs |

Sources: Mone, Eisinger, Guggenheim, Price, and Stince (2011); Trahan (2009)



Job Design

Some jobs can be enriched to increase satisfaction and foster higher levels of motivation and performance. Hackman's (Hackman & Lawler 1971; Hackman & Oldham, 1980) job characteristics model proposed that employees who performed enriched jobs (i.e., jobs that have variety, meaningfulness, afforded responsibility, and feedback) are energized and perform at a higher level. More recently, Humphrey et al. (2007) elaborated on this model by incorporating motivational characteristics (e.g., task variety, information processing), characteristics of the social environment (e.g., interdependence, social support), and contextual factors (e.g., physical demands, ergonomics). This model also expanded the list of potential outcomes, including many that have direct relevance to the concept of psychological engagement (e.g., affective organizational commitment and job involvement). Lastly, Christian et al. (2011) found work engagement to be positively related to job characteristics including task variety, task significance, and feedback. Although few studies have investigated the effects of job design on engagement, existing job design studies could serve as an important guide for organizations seeking to design work to enhance engagement. This approach is consistent with recommendations made by the U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board (MSPB) regarding job characteristics and their impact on employee motivation (U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, 2012). Of course, job design efforts intended to enhance engagement in the Federal Government must be consistent with Federal classification standards and other applicable laws and regulations.

Selection

Research is limited on identifying specific selection procedures as they relate to engagement. Within this research literature, however, findings indicate that employees tend to be more or less engaged – that is, exhibit trait engagement – depending on personality factors such as extraversion, neuroticism, and conscientiousness. For example, in their meta-analysis, Christian et al. (2011) found work engagement to be correlated with

conscientiousness and positive affectivity (i.e., those predisposed to alertness and enthusiasm). Additionally, workers who have been found to be engaged in their jobs tend to be emotionally stable, socially proactive, and achievement-oriented (Inceoglu & Warr, 2011). Grant (2008) showed that a sense of belief in the value of work (intrinsic motivation, or trait engagement) was more important than external contingencies (state-based engagement) for performance. With regard to engagement and selection processes, Meyer (2013) indicated the need for developing or modifying a selection system to identify one's propensity for engagement. In other words, Meyer suggested organizations could identify an appropriate personality measure to be incorporated with an existing battery of assessments to predict one's engagement level once they are on the job. Inceoglu and Warr (2011) concluded that the benefit of information about these traits can be valuable in the development of job engagement through person-focused task assignments and the setting of targets that build on specific employee strengths. Lastly, Christian et al. (2011) concluded that because employees can only be as engaged as the work itself allows, selecting for these traits most likely needs to be conducted in congruence with job design. Finally, while selection literature has not directly addressed the role of hiring managers to create engagement, significant amounts of research summarized in a meta-analysis (DeRue et al., 2011) showed that both leadership behaviors and traits contributed to higher group performance, and that these behaviors and traits encompassed both transactional leadership (focused on goal setting, contingent rewards, and efficiency) and transformational leadership (focused on inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration) approaches, suggesting that promotion to management should consider the competencies in the assessment process rather than hoping they emerge once the individual is in position. Like any selection procedure used in the Federal Government, those targeting engagement must be job-related and consistent with merit system principles.



Communities of Practice

Collaboration among agencies can provide valuable insight regarding ways to improve employee engagement within the Federal Government. A community of practice can provide a strategic and structured platform for this kind of collaboration. A community of practice refers to “. . . groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis” (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002, p. 4). The benefits of engaging in a community of practice include the ability to quickly and efficiently identify and share best practices and the ability to transfer knowledge among agencies to facilitate implementation of best practices.

Several factors have been identified to enhance the success of the communities of practice outcomes. These factors are: (1) communicating the expected outcomes as expectations are critical to encourage participation; (2) promoting a knowledge-sharing culture which can best be promoted when the results of sharing knowledge can be shown to support the achievement of organizational objectives; (3) identifying subject matter experts and finding ways to ensure their involvement; and (4) considering ways to encourage transfer of learning such as recognition, rewards, performance support, and performance evaluation tools (Chang & Jacobs, 2012). The community of practice organizers and facilitators are generally in the best position to ensure these factors are considered and implemented.

“Collaboration among agencies can provide valuable insight regarding ways to improve employee engagement within the Federal government.”

Key Indicators and Outcomes

Employee engagement has been found to be related to several organizational outcomes. Kahn (1992) proposed that engagement leads to both individual outcomes (i.e., quality of people’s work and their own experiences of doing that work) and organizational outcomes (i.e., the growth and productivity of organizations). At the individual level, Alfes, Truss, Soane, Rees, & Gatenby (2010) found that employees who are engaged are more innovative than others, 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. Further, evidence supports that engagement is related to job performance and is conducive to creating a social context that produces discretionary behaviors such as teamwork (Christian et al., 2011). Saks (2006) found organizational engagement (i.e., involvement in organizational initiatives) to be a strong predictor of job satisfaction and organizational commitment. Additionally, engagement has been shown to predict lower levels of absenteeism (Soan, Shantz, Alfes, Truss, Rees, & Gatenby, 2013) and turnover intention (Shuck & Rocco, 2011).

Numerous studies have shown that engagement impacts a number of key performance indicators for organizations. Specifically, organizational productivity, organizational citizenship behavior, safety, and financial performance (Harter et al., 2002; Harter et al., 2010), and enhanced customer satisfaction and loyalty (Salanova, Agut, & Peiro, 2005) have been shown to be positively correlated with a more engaged workforce. Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) complaints, safety incidents, work-related injuries, sick days, and theft are negatively correlated with a more engaged workforce. Recently the Secretary of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security opined that low employee morale was threatening the capacity of employees within the Department to protect the nation’s security (Markon, Nakashima, & Crites, 2014). Finally and more broadly, the U.S. Congress is so concerned about low employee morale and



the ensuing potential impact on the Government's ability to serve the needs of the public that it has commissioned the Government Accountability Office to investigate the causes of low morale across the Federal Government (U.S. House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, 2014).

The Federal Government's Human Capital Assessment and Accountability Framework (HCAAF) contains several performance indicators directly affected by employee engagement. The HCAAF indices were created to help guide agencies in building high-performing organizations by providing consistent metrics for measuring progress toward HCAAF objectives. The four FEVS HCAAF indices (Leadership & Knowledge Management, Results-Oriented Performance Culture, Talent Management, and Job Satisfaction) were developed to help agencies meet the requirements of OPM's mandate under the Chief Human Capital Officers Act of 2002 to design systems, set standards, and develop metrics for assessing the management of Federal employees. Direct links between the HCAAF and employee engagement can be found throughout this report. Effective leadership is critical to both the HCAAF and employee engagement. Engaged employees tend to be more productive which will positively impact agencies' efforts to achieve a results-oriented performance culture. Engaged employees also tend to be more innovative, less likely to be absent, more likely to stay with their employer, and more willing to engage in discretionary effort all of which will facilitate agencies' efforts to manage their talent.

Finally, employee engagement has been shown to be a strong predictor of both job satisfaction and organizational commitment.

An emerging framework, called the New IQ, shows promise in furthering our understanding of some of the variables that influence employee engagement (Stewart, 2014). The New IQ is built on the concept that individual behaviors, repeated over time, form the habits that create the essential building blocks of an inclusive environment. These behaviors can be learned, practiced, and developed into habits of inclusiveness and subsequently improve the inclusive intelligence of organizational members. Inclusion, in this context, is defined as the ability to include differences in a friendly, flexible, and fair way, making all employees feel welcome and important. OPM's Office of Diversity and Inclusion (ODI) and the Veteran's Administration's Diversity and Inclusion Office evaluated data from the OPM Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey and found that inclusion practices are positively correlated with employee satisfaction and workplace inclusion is a contributing factor to employee engagement and organizational performance. The New IQ reflects a way of thinking about the workplace that focuses on how to make the entire team smarter and more creative, rather than focusing on individual performance. Using the insights provided by New IQ may help agencies create an environment in which every employee feels accepted and acknowledged for their contributions, and thus create and sustain a highly engaged Federal workforce.



Conclusion

More than ever, the need to focus on employee engagement within the Federal Government is apparent. In recent years, the levels of employee satisfaction and engagement in the Federal Government have declined. This is documented in both the OPM Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey (FEVS) results and the Partnership for Public Service's Best Places to Work in the Federal Government rankings, which are based on FEVS data. The Best Places to Work results show that the level of employee satisfaction across the Federal Government is the lowest it's been since the Partnership began ranking agencies in 2003 (Partnership for Public Service, 2015). While this finding is not positive, there is substantial opportunity to improve employee engagement in the near future. Systematic implementation of strategies to improve engagement will drive the increases in organizational effectiveness associated with highly engaged employees.

Goal 6 of OPM's strategic plan states that OPM will provide leadership in helping agencies create inclusive work environments where a diverse Federal workforce is fully engaged and energized to put forth its best effort, achieve their agency's mission, and remain committed to public service. Consistent with that Goal, this report (1) summarized OPM's review of recent employee engagement research, (2) presented a definition of employee engagement as it specifically relates the Federal workforce and a model of engagement to provide a practical approach to measuring and improving employee engagement and (3) summarized best practices used to drive sustainable employee engagement.

“Systematic implementation of strategies to improve engagement will drive the increases in organizational effectiveness associated with highly engaged employees.”



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