

Chapter 109

Job Engagement Levels Across the Generations at Work

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ABSTRACT

For more than a decade, low levels of employee engagement have consistently been reported by the press and consultant community. A recurring chorus has emerged from this pattern of reporting: not only are less than 30% of employees fully engaged in their work, but this statistic is even lower among the fastest growing segment of the workforce – Millennials. But is the engagement level of Millennials really as low as reported? Are Millennials more likely to be actively disengaged than their older coworkers? This chapter takes a fresh look at these questions. A series of field studies were conducted to determine if there are indeed large differences in the level of engagement between the generations. The research conclusions in this chapter are at odds with the often-cited reports of low employee engagement. The reason for this variance is discussed and actionable solutions for facilitating high levels of employee engagement across a generation-diverse workforce are offered.

INTRODUCTION

For over a decade we have been exposed to steady reporting of the low level of employee engagement. This is not merely an American problem; the levels of engagement around the globe are reported to be dismally low. Within this consistent reporting a recurring chorus has emerged: Not only are less than 30% of employees fully engaged in their work, this statistic is even lower in the fastest growing segment of the workforce – Millennials. This chorus seems to be reaching a crescendo and organizations are focusing on increasing resources to address this concern. But is the engagement level of Millennials really as low as reported? Are Millennials more likely to be actively disengaged than their older coworkers?

In this chapter, we take a fresh look at these questions. We conducted a series of field studies to determine if there are indeed differences in the level of engagement among Baby Boomers, Generation X, and Millennial cohorts. These studies involved employees from a wide variety of organizations and job categories. Rather than relying on a measure of engagement that focuses on contextual antecedents to engagement, we utilized a measure of engagement that is more clearly aligned with the conceptual definitions of engagement originally developed by Kahn (1990). This allowed us to take a deeper look at engagement by examining the cognitive, emotional, and physical components of employee engagement. Our conclusions are at odds with reports in the popular press. We discuss reasons for this variance and provide a discussion of actionable items for addressing the issues of engagement and disengagement across the generationally diverse workforce.

The Consequences and Complexities of Employee Engagement

Surveys of employee engagement consistently report that approximately 70% of U.S. employees are not engaged in their work (Aon, 2016; Gallup, 2015; PwC, 2015). Engagement is not simply an American problem. Drawing on Gallup's engagement research, Bersin (2015, p.148) claims that worldwide only 13% of employees are "highly engaged" and that 26% are "actively disengaged." More troubling is the idea that actively disengaged employees may influence those individuals who are in the middle of the engagement continuum.

Estimates of the costs associated with disengagement range from \$483 billion to \$605 billion annually (Gallup, 2017). These costs and the loss of productivity related to disengagement have led organizations to make significant investments in initiatives designed to increase employee engagement levels. The engagement literature maintains that high engagement levels are positively associated with a host of appealing outcomes (Christian, Garza, & Slaughter, 2011; Crawford, Lepine, & Rich, 2010; Harter, Schmidt, & Hayes, 2002) including: firm performance (Barrick, Thurgood, Smith, & Courtright, 2015), employee performance (Owens, Baker, Sumpter, & Cameron, 2016; Vogel, Rodell, & Lynch, 2016), and positive work attitudes (Byrne, Peters, & Weston, 2016; Shuck, Adelson, & Reio, 2017). Despite these positive consequences, employee engagement has barely moved from the 30% it was 13 years ago (Gallup, 2015).

The issues associated with low levels of employee engagement have become exacerbated by the substantial demographic shift that has taken place in the workplace. Millennials are now the largest group of employees in the U.S. workforce making up 35% (Fry, 2018). However, the current percentage of older workers is projected to increase. According to the Pew Research Center (Fry, 2018), more than a third of the U.S. labor force in 2017 consisted of Millennials (1982-2000: 35%), followed by Gen X (1965-1981: 33%), Baby Boomers (1946-1964: 25%), and post-Millennials (2001 and after: 5%). As

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