Taking the Pulse of Employee Engagement

How to effectively listen to your workforce
Employee engagement has never been a “nice to have” quality for company culture. In fact, it has always been seen as a clear-cut competitive advantage.

How important is engagement? One business expert, Kevin Kruse, cites 29 different research studies that demonstrate how engagement can, among other things, boost sales, profits, shareholder value and (HR leaders and decision makers pay attention here) the ability to attract and retain the best talent available.1

If employee engagement has been directly correlated to business success for decades, why haven’t business leaders been able to successfully solve for engagement? For instance, Gallup has been tracking employee engagement in the U.S. since 2000. Though there have been some slight changes, less than one-third of U.S. employees have been engaged in their jobs and workplaces through 2015. And in its State of the American Workplace 2017 report, only one-third of U.S. employees are engaged at work. “Bluntly, many employees feel indifferent about their jobs,” Gallup reports.2

Why have organizations failed to move the engagement needle?

Today, most employers still measure engagement through lengthy, annual workforce-wide surveys — only 11% are measuring more frequently.3 The data doesn't lie: it's not working. From a research standpoint, the abundance of questions in the classic census survey format have illuminated the connection between engagement and business performance. But research has not been able to drive consistent engagement improvements.

It’s time to disrupt the engagement survey status quo in order to move the engagement needle.

“Video killed the radio star”

While annual (or less frequent) employee engagement assessments have become the trusted “gold standard” approach to engagement measurement, the process to execute the surveys continues to represent a major project for HR, requiring significant time and resources to administer and analyze.

Unfortunately, these efforts represent an investment that hasn't paid off. The long-standing employee engagement census survey has failed when it comes to driving engagement levels higher. The macro data on employee engagement — in the low 30 percent range — tells the story. If annual surveys helped boost engagement, the numbers would surely reflect it. As the Gallup data shows, they don’t.

It’s not that thoroughness is a bad idea. But what is clear is that the original design of the annual engagement survey, albeit limited by available technology at the time, has made it too complicated and cumbersome to truly decipher the drivers behind engagement. The result: employees continue to feel disengaged, disconnected and indifferent in the workplace.

“The world isn’t really on an annual cycle anymore for anything.”

– Susan Peters, SVP HR, GE

It's important to say that the firms who offer traditional annual engagement surveys have had the trust of HR leadership for a long time. Longevity, however, is no guarantee of ongoing reliability and relevance. After all, if the old way of doing things was working, employee engagement would not be such a seemingly insurmountable challenge.

By continuing to deploy the traditional annual survey strategy, HR is hindered by an increasingly archaic model of employee engagement measurement. This model has remained time-consuming in a large part because survey vendors built their business model around the annual survey process — which perhaps made sense decades ago. But with tighter margins and thinner resources, that's no longer the case. It's become an “old world” approach to a “new world” challenge.
**Do you know what your employees want — today?**

Annual employee engagement surveys can yield extensive insights. But these insights arrive too late. Waiting 1-6 months for the analysis is typical. That means by the time managers have engagement data in hand, it's out of date. And may have little or no relationship to how people are currently feeling and functioning.

That leaves HR and leadership in a catch-22. Tackling issues identified in the survey results may be going down a path that's no longer relevant. But not addressing the results at all means the organization gained nothing more than data to archive from the exercise. In either scenario, so much of the process represents wasted effort. And a missed opportunity to tackle problems before increased disengagement, reduced productivity and expensive turnover result.

The employee's experience is also important. The annual survey, with potentially dozens of questions, is a burden for the individual to complete. The process of responding can itself put a real damper on their enthusiasm.

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**Picking up the pace: Moving to “pulse” engagement measurement**

Measuring employee engagement isn't happening often enough. But measurement alone doesn't make change. The need is to measure engagement and transform the data into effective action.

Measuring engagement more frequently is commonly called “pulsing,” as in taking the workforce's “engagement pulse.” Pulse measurement typically involves limited questions — between 10 and 20 — delivered to employees several times a year (the most common pulse measurement cadence is quarterly). It can also include an employee Net Promoter Score (eNPS) component (see sidebar on next page).

The limited number of questions in pulse measurement means that employees can complete a pulse survey in 5-10 minutes. Not only is it easier to focus and provide clear and honest responses in that time frame, today's always-connected workforce, operating in hyper-time, are most comfortable — hence responsive — with a shorter format.

Leaders may benefit most of all. With only a small set of engagement questions that are most predictive of engagement, people managers can see in what matters to their teams and perhaps most importantly, easily identify what they need to do.
Don’t just stand there...

In this new world of pulse measurement, business leaders might worry employees will experience “survey fatigue.” The truth however is that employees are only tired of surveys that, time and again, fail to lead to any noticeable change. At root, the problem and hurdle is “inaction fatigue,” driven by long, annual surveys that offer little in terms of immediate action. Many, if not most, consumers have experienced the “we’ll call you right back” promise from a customer service representative, often never to hear from them again. Take that approach and no number of pulse surveys will help you.

Ensuring that doesn’t happen requires a technology platform that can analyze pulse engagement data and provide HR and managers with bite-sized actions they can take in real time — tomorrow or the next day — to immediately start to address any disengagement within their team, before it results in a dip in morale, a loss of productivity or worst case, talent turnover.

Engagement for the real world

Employee engagement is not a fluffy “nice to have” concept; it remains highly predictive of bottom line business success and a positive workplace culture. To manage and influence engagement in a positive direction, it’s critical for leaders to keep their finger on the ever-changing pulse of engagement. Simple, regular surveys, that enable effective and immediate actions, are essential to finally impact engagement for today’s organizations.

Today, the science and technology have arrived, not only to help HR and business leaders make this paradigm shift to measuring engagement in real time, but in giving today’s employees who are used to responsiveness in their everyday lives as consumers, a great incentive — that is, frequent feedback — to help them become more engaged as well.

Organizations that can adopt this new way of thinking — collecting and effectively, and quickly, acting on employee feedback — stand to succeed.

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1 https://www.kevinkruse.com/employee-engagement-research-master-list-of-29-studies
3 Aon Hewitt, “Continuous Listening: The Evolution of Employee Experience Measurement”, February 2017
4 http://www.netpromotersystem.com/about/employee-engagement.aspx
5 Achievers customer base retention for FY2017
6 Average survey rating by Achievers customer program members, Oct 1, 2017-March 19, 2018
7 Average employee activation rate across all Achievers customer programs, 2017

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**eNPS:**

Concentrated engagement insight

An offshoot of Bain & Company’s Net Promoter® Score (NPS®), the employee Net Promoter Score (eNPS) offers employers a way to take an employee engagement “snapshot.” By asking a variation of the question “On a scale of zero to ten, how likely is it that you would recommend this company as a place to work?” employers can segment employees into “promoters, passives and detractors” (from the original NPS process). The eNPS score is then calculated by subtracting the percentage of detractors from the percentage of promoters (passives don’t factor into an eNPS score).

As with assessing engagement, eNPS is most actionable when measured regularly – and anonymously. It’s a bellwether to “help teams and team leaders recognize and prioritize issues.” With only one or two questions, eNPS is designed to provide quick feedback for supervisors and leaders.4

eNPS fits within a comprehensive engagement measurement approach as a potent way to measure employee engagement.
Achievers is a behavior-driving employee engagement platform. Our award-winning global solution listens to employees and aligns them with business objectives and company values. Combining the highest-adopted employee recognition tools with an intelligent, always-on, Active Listening Interface, Achievers empowers everyone to impact engagement right away.

Achievers enables enterprises around the world and across industries to accelerate employee engagement and achieve remarkable results.

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Member Satisfaction 89%  
User Adoption 87%