EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT IN THE UAE AMONG UAE NATIONALS AND ARAB EXPATS: THE IMPORTANCE OF A CONTINUOUS APPROACH
Employee engagement in the UAE among UAE nationals and Arab expats: The importance of a continuous approach

How do you feel at work today? How happy are you in your current role? And what about your employees? How and to what extent do your employees contribute to the organization? Employee engagement goes beyond job satisfaction. An employee that stays in a job because the benefits and working hours are good, might be satisfied but is probably far from engaged. Engagement is the level of commitment and involvement an employee has towards its organization and values.

According to Gallup, there are three categories of employee engagement – namely, being engaged, not engaged and being actively disengaged. In an extensive study in which employed Emiratis and Arab expats in the UAE were surveyed, Gallup (2013) found that 26% of these employees are engaged in their jobs (13% worldwide) — that is, they are psychologically committed to their jobs and likely to be making positive contributions to their organizations. However, most employees in this group (60% UAE, 63% worldwide) are not engaged – i.e., they are not putting energy and passion into their work and are less likely to invest effort in organizational goals and outcomes. These employees might be satisfied, but are not the ones that drive innovation or bring forward the organization. The most critical and disruptive group of employees are those who are actively disengaged – that is, they are unhappy, unproductive, negative and potentially hostile to their organization and co-workers. In the UAE, 14% of employed Emiratis and Arab expats are actively disengaged (24% worldwide).

Why are engaged employees an asset?

At 26%, employed Emiratis and Arab expats in the UAE are among the most likely in the Arab Gulf region to be engaged. However, that leaves almost three in four employees not engaged or actively disengaged at work. This shows that there is a huge potential in focusing on increasing engagement levels, in particular when looking at UAE nationals. So, why should organizations try to create a culture of high engagement? Engaged employees strongly identify with the goals and values of the organization they are working for. They are committed not only to their jobs, but to the organization as a whole. Engaged employees are happier, healthier and are performing better than disengaged employees and will help an organization attract more talented people. Gallup’s latest employee engagement meta-analysis study confirmed that organizations with more engaged employees have better chances of achieving the organizational outcomes they are aiming for — such as revenue, profit and productivity (Gallup, 2016). Disengaged employees on the other hand, are costly due to lower productivity, higher absenteeism, as well as higher recruitment and training cost.
UAE’s need for engaged employees

In their comprehensive Middle Eastern Workforce Insights Study (2016), CIPD states several factors that shape how businesses in the Middle East view their future workforce strategy – these are, change in customer demands and demographics (34%), changing economic and political environment (32%), and shifting employee relationships and expectations (27%). The UAE economy is continuing to grow through extension of foreign investments and expansion of the private sector. Raising employee’s productivity levels and retaining talents in organizations will remain critical to rapid growth of the economy. Organizations that meet their employees’ needs are most likely to achieve this. With the current youth unemployment rate being 28.4% in the Middle East (Horne et al, 2016), it is necessary for the government and industry leaders to engage younger generations of Emiratis in their work and provide meaningful employment to promote long-term growth and global competitiveness.

The top current strategic workforce priorities in the Middle East fall into three major themes—these are, (1) attraction and retention of talent, (2) employee well-being, happiness and engagement, and (3) learning, development and performance management (CIPD, 2016). It is no surprise that the need to build highly engaged workplaces has become a critical business topic in the last years. An increasing number of organizations in the UAE are including employee engagement on their strategic agenda and are trying to find answers to the question “How do we create a culture of high engagement?”

Why do organizations fail to create a culture of high engagement?

Interestingly, few organizations are in fact successful in creating and maintaining a culture of high engagement. There are many reasons for this, but the main factor might be that most of organizations adopt a simplistic approach when creating programs to enhance employee engagement. Often, organizations take one-time initiatives that are supposed to be good examples or “best practices” from the industry, such as a team building event, a one-time payment, or a renovation of office spaces. Even though there are many good examples and ideas about how to improve employee engagement, not every idea will have the same impact in every organization. Employee engagement is not a program that can be copied from one organization and “pasted” into another. Employee engagement is an ongoing part of the DNA of an organization and it is therefore critical that it is defined, assessed and enhanced for every organization individually.
A continuous engagement approach

Organizations that are striving for a culture of high engagement, should start with obtaining more insight in their organization through an extensive assessment. How does the organization define engagement? What are the engagement levels of their different teams? What blocks and drives engagement in their organization? What is going well and what needs to be improved? This assessment will help organizations decide on the elements of their culture they want to maintain as well as the topics that need to be addressed and/or improved. Currently, most organizations are measuring engagement though a yearly or bi-yearly survey. Typically, some key improvement areas are found, published, discussed in workshops and translated into action plans. The effects and impact of these action plans and proposed changes are rarely measured. Organizations lose track of the impact of changes until they measure again one or two years later. Since employee engagement is an ongoing part of the organization’s culture and strategy, an engagement survey should not be a once a year event. Instead, organizations need to find ways to always be improving engagement. Therefore, employee engagement should be monitored and analyzed on a frequent basis, e.g. on a weekly or bi-weekly basis through a pulse survey.

Conclusion

When creating a culture of high engagement, continuous measurement of engagement levels in the organization and continuously finding ways to improve engagement is the future. First, frequent measurement will enable organizations to observe and monitor trends in their data. Outcomes will be more representative and less biased by the moment the survey was filled out. Second, through continues measurement, an employee survey becomes an important tool and integrated part of the wider engagement strategy. Immediate actions can be taken based on the results. Third, the return of invest of organizational change and new engagement initiatives can be measured. Do engagement levels actually increase after a summer party or a yearly summit? What is the effect of a restructuring project on the overall engagement? This is critical information when analyzing the impact of engagement on organizational outcomes such as revenue, profit and productivity.

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References:
· Gallup Q12 Meta-Analysis Report (2016)
· Workforce Insights: A Middle East perspective (CIPD, 2016)
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