

Remote Workers and Employee Engagement

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Executive Summary

This paper explores the importance and background of remote employee engagement with the purpose of identifying solutions to encourage and maintain engagement. The introduction focuses on providing definitions for key terms, as well as, statistics that illustrate the reach and importance of this topic. The background and problem section further dive into the concept of employee engagement and briefly points out existing gaps in the research. Additionally, the importance of communication, relationships and how technology can aid are discussed. Three solutions are presented as potential ways to drive remote employee engagement. First, mandating in office days for employees is reviewed. Then, leveraging a VEEP, or virtual employee engagement platform is discussed. Finally, the concept of gamification is explored to address engagement concerns with remote employees. Ultimately, all three solutions provide an effective method to address the problem, however it is suggested that starting with implementation of VEEPS is best for an organization when working towards increasing remote employee engagement.

Introduction

The remote employee population is growing at a rapid rate and has increased 173% since 2005 (Global Workplace Analytics, 2019). Additionally, 4.7 million United States employees work remotely at least part time and that number continues to increase every day (Global Workplace Analytics, 2019). Employees are no longer bound to working within office walls, but instead can choose where they complete their work. Remote workers are employees who may work outside the office full time, work from home a few days per week or even work in a satellite office (Kohen, 2019). Not only is the remote employee population growing, but 68% of United States employees are disengaged with their work (Boogard, 2017). With these two concepts in mind, it is no surprise that academics and organizations are very interested in understanding how to keep remote employees engaged in their work. The purpose of this paper is to explore crucial components to encouraging remote employee engagement. Understanding these components allows for a thorough assessment of various solutions that support remote employee engagement.

Background and Problem

Employee engagement is defined differently throughout current literature. Saks and Gruman (2014) point out that there is no existing consensus on the meaning of employee engagement and how it is defined. Additionally, it's challenging to differentiate concepts of commitment and burnout from employee engagement. However, researchers seek to understand if these concepts should be differentiated or if they correlate to employee engagement. Although a universal definition is yet to be accepted, Kahn's (1990) pioneering definition is frequently cited throughout research. He states that employee engagement can be defined by individuals "bringing all aspects of themselves- cognitive, emotional and physical- to the performance of their work".

This approach focuses on the psychological aspect of employee engagement; the more invested an employee is in their job, the more engaged they are with the organization. An additional theory or definition of employee engagement comes from Maslach et al. (2001). This group defines engagement from the perspective of burnout, stating that engagement is the opposite of burnout. While this helps to understand what engagement is not, it still does not aid in supporting a universal definition of engagement. Perhaps one of the biggest challenges with a singular definition is differentiating engagement from commitment or the antithesis of burnout. It is challenging to separate an employee's organizational engagement from their personal desire to perform well or maintain a job that supports their needs (Jacobs, 2008).

Employee engagement is crucial for any organization, but for companies with remote employees, it is especially important. As various definitions infer, at a high-level employee engagement can be gauged by an employee's commitment to an organization and desire to perform well (Kruse, 2012). These concepts are key to an organization's success because poor performance and turnover are costly. Additionally, organizations benefit from remote workers in a variety of ways. For example, companies spend less money on office space and see more productive workers because they spend less time commuting and refocus that time on work (Forbes, 2017). These savings impact a wide range of industries because so many are offering remote job opportunities. Industries such as medical, customer service, education, sales and accounting are just a few of the many places employees can find a career that allows them to work remotely. With so many industries turning to employing a remote workforce, it is imperative to re-evaluate how organizations approach keeping their employees engaged.

Communication is key when it comes to keeping employees engaged, regardless if they are remote or in office. However, communication needs to become more intentional when an

employee works remotely. Essentially, remote workers need a manager who understands how to communicate with them (Staples, Hulland, Higgins, 1999). This includes knowing the most effective channel, the right frequency, what to talk about and when to listen. When it comes to using the right channel, research suggests that although forums like email and digital discussion boards are two-way communication, remote employees don't often perceive them as such (Jacobs, 2006). Remote employees feel as though these channels are typically used to communicate a message to a vast majority of people, which means the message may not always pertain to them and often causes them to "tune out". Managers need to leverage channels that support personalized conversation (Grenny & Maxfield, 2017).

Technology and channels available for communication with remote employees is not only important for the manager-employee relationship, it is equally important the tools and approach supports peer to peer relationships. Working remotely can be isolating, but having strong relationships with peers can combat that (Hickman, 2018). Research shows that remote employees value quality time with their managers and their peers (White, 2017). As discussed, when remote employees see links between their own values and the values of their organization, they are more inclined to be engaged. It's important to note that quality time with peers' correlates to engagement in remote and in-office employees, however it is higher with remote employees (White, 2018). This is important because quality time in office happens much more organically than it does for remote employees. For employees that work in an office, they can have a chance run in with a manager or colleague and take advantage of that time to connect. With remote employees, there is little opportunity for spontaneous quality time, so it is important that this is planned. Creating engagement through quality time requires a proactive and conscious effort (White, 2018).

Solution

A solution that may work for certain organizations or industries is mandating in office time for remote employees. This not only creates an opportunity for managers to have focused conversations with their employees, but also encourages peer to peer relationships which are both contributing factors to employee engagement. Patel (2017) cites that bringing a remote team together once or twice a year can have a strong, positive impact on employee engagement. Also, according to Gallup, employees that work in office at least one day a week are happier and more engaged with their organization (Moss, 2018). This solution allows for the richest level of communication, face to face. In fact, 21% of remote workers struggle with 'loneliness' and a Gallup poll found that employees that worked in office at least once a week felt more engaged and fulfilled (Muhammed, 2019).

Perhaps the most important thing remote employees can gain from visiting the office periodically is face-to-face communication. This type of communication allows for the richest interaction, which is not possible when employees are working remotely. Even with video conferencing, employees still lack the depth that in office communication offers. In person communication helps build trust, allows those involved to read body language and is ideal for difficult or complex conversations (Caldwell, 2018). Additionally, relationship building conversations are typically more natural and happen when you bump into a colleague getting coffee or stay a few minutes after a meeting to catch up. These opportunities are frequent when employees work in office, however when they work remotely, they are less likely to occur.

Although this solution solves for the issues that remote employees face with organizational engagement, it disrupts the benefits of working remotely. For employees, working remotely offers

a convenience and often saves time and money. Additionally, if organizations were to require employees to spend time in office, they would need to be prepared to have the space and tools required to support in office. This could take away from the cost savings that many organizations see from employing a remote work force. For remote employees that don't live close to the office, organizations may need to look at travel compensation, depending on what their own policies are. It could be quite costly to ask employees to come in office periodically, however it is still a solution to consider because employees who are disengaged are costly as well. A disengaged employee can cost an organization 34% of an employee's annual salary (Petrone, 2017).

Instead of focusing on leveraging engagement practices that work for in office employees, perhaps a more practical solution is looking at engaging remote employees from where they are. Employees and employers have chosen remote options for a reason, whether it be work/life balance, monetary savings or time savings. Finding a way to foster employee engagement while continuing to encourage remote work is the key to success. To make this happen, organizations should leverage virtual employee engagement platforms, or VEEPs. "A virtual employee engagement platform is defined as a company's virtual touchpoints which are designed to provide structural support for employees to exchange and integrate resources and to facilitate virtual employee-to-company and employee-to-employee interactions" (Kim & Gatling, 2018). VEEPs can offer a variety of ways to communicate; from engaging socially, collaborating on projects, to integrating other systems needed to complete work. However, if organizations leverage VEEPs as a solution to engage their remote employees, there are important factors to keep in mind. If a VEEP is not perceived as easy to use, employees are resistant to adopting the platform (Kim & Gatling, 2018). Remote employees want a platform that simplifies their work-life, not complicates it. That is why organizations need to carefully review VEEPs available and select an option that is easy

for employees to use, encourages communication and helps establish a sense of connection with peers.

Companies like Unily and Microsoft offers a one-stop platform that supports collaborative content management and social interactions, while allowing for integration from other popular platforms for a complete experience. They support desktop and mobile, which increases the ease of use for remote employees. This workforce population values flexibility with how and when they work and having the option to have their office inside their pocket is a convenience. Employees can create profiles with details about themselves, both personal and professional, and even attach a profile picture. This helps create a social connection between remote employees because they do not often interact with peers face to face. It is important that remote employees establish peer-to-peer relationships because they positively correlate to employee engagement (Hickman, 2018). Features such as hash tags and trending topics simulate and mirror other popular social media sites outside the business word. The social aspect of VEEPS offer the ability to recognize achievements and share recognition with the team. White (2018) points out that words of affirmation are positively received by all employees, regardless of if they work remotely or not. Having a capability to not only recognize peers and employees, but also showcase those words of affirmation to others drives engagement.

Not only do VEEPs from companies like Unily and Microsoft offer social interaction, but also offer interaction analytics. This allows an organization to have a consistent pulse on how engaged the employees are with the platform. In fact, analytics can often drill all the way down to an individual user. If a manager identifies a trend of disengagement with a particular employee, they can talk to the employee to help re-engage them. Whether a manager needs to re-engage an employee or have a routine discussion, VEEPs offer the ability to video conference or even support

‘plug-ins’ to integrate other web conferencing platforms. Video conferencing is preferred when talking with remote employees because it has greater success at driving engagement (Grenny & Maxfield, 2017). Remote employees need to feel connected to their organization to be engaged and having personal conversations with their manager or peers aids in that. However, it’s equally important that managers set aside time to discuss performance and expectations. With remote employees being physically away from their managers, it is easier to fall off track or not understand what is expected of them.

A third solution for remote employee engagement is gamification. Gamification recognizes the rise in technology use, specifically for social purposes, and engages people with game like thinking (Alsawaier, 2017). Aspects of gamification are rooted in problem solving and effective reward structures (Jena, Bhattacharyya & Pradhan, 2018). Gamification in the workplace isn’t just turning a project into a game of jeopardy or office bingo. Gamification “plays on the psychology that drives human engagement—the drive to compete, improve, and out-do—and to get instantly rewarded while doing so” (Newman, 2017). While all employees can benefit from gamification, not just remote, it is a solution that is uniquely situated for the remote workforce. Gamification relies on technology platforms to turn work into a ‘game’ and remote employees are reliant on technology to get their work done.

Gamification is a concept that offers an organization and its employees many benefits. It naturally leads to clearer expectations and a fairer way to measure performance (Caramela, 2018). Remote employees are often less clear on what is expected of them compared to their in-office peers, which is why managers need to have find a way to bridge that gap (Shaik & Makhecha, 2019). There is a greater sense of equality between all employees and less concern for favoritism for employees that have more “face time” with managers. It eliminates the age-old fear “out of

sight, out of mind”. Gamification naturally leverages clear expectations and measurements of success. Gamification not only puts everyone on a level playing field, but also helps create a strong sense of team at the same time. Organizations can build a gamification platform and culture that not only encourages individual performance, but also team performance. Setting team goals and expectations creates a sense of accountability with one another and encourages teams to work together towards a common goal.

Potential drawbacks to consider with this solution include stress in employees who do not work well under pressure and potential generational and industry differences. This solution should be carefully considered to ensure it is the right fit for an organization. Pratoshta et al (2018) explain that gamification is a good approach for Gen Y because of their need to be social, gain recognition and tech savvy mentality. Perhaps for older generations it may not be the right fit. Additionally, gamification assumes that the work being done can be measured, however that is not the case for all industries (Newman, 2017). For examples, creatives like writers may find that attempting to incorporate success metrics is challenging. Lastly, gamification can be stressful because it does rely heavily on performance. Employees who are not motivated by competition may feel as though they are being micro-managed or held to a standard they do not believe in.

Ultimately, mandating in office time, VEEPs and gamification are all effective in the right organization, under the right circumstances. There may even be situations where all three can be used simultaneously. However, at a starting point all organizations should leverage a VEEP to engage their remote employees. Communication is vital to keeping employees engaged when they are not in the office, and VEEPs offer the right forum. The right platform helps integrate not only the social aspect of work, but also the collaborative and productive aspect as well. Well built platforms are simple and intuitive to use and allow an employee to work smarter while feeling

engaged with their organization and peers. Potential risks with this solution include choosing a platform that is not user friendly and the social aspect being used to create an unhealthy culture. If the platform is not easy to use, employees will resist adopting it which negates the solution. Organizations should choose a platform that fits their unique needs or explore creating their own. If employees do adopt the platform, managers should have a pulse on the culture it creates from a social aspect. Social media is often used as a place to voice frustrations or concerns which can hurt engagement instead of helping it.

Conclusion

“70% of business transformation efforts fail due to lack of engagement” (Pickard, 2015). Remote employee engagement is necessary for an organization to be successful. Remote employees need to feel connected to their organization, their manager and their peers. They need to feel as though they are not missing out because they aren't in the office. This is challenging but it is not impossible. Recognizing that approaches that worked when the work force was in office may not work now that they are at home is key. Intentional and mindful communication is important but there are solutions that can help even further. Three solutions to drive employee engagement include mandating in office time, leveraging a VEEP and instilling gamification in the workplace. All three solutions have merit and can be successful when used in the right organization, however a VEEP is foundational for creating employee engagement. A VEEP bridges the gap that geographical distance creates and acts as a virtual office. In conclusion, as the workplace and the way we work continues to evolve, organizations must also continue to evolve how they maintain employee engagement.

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