

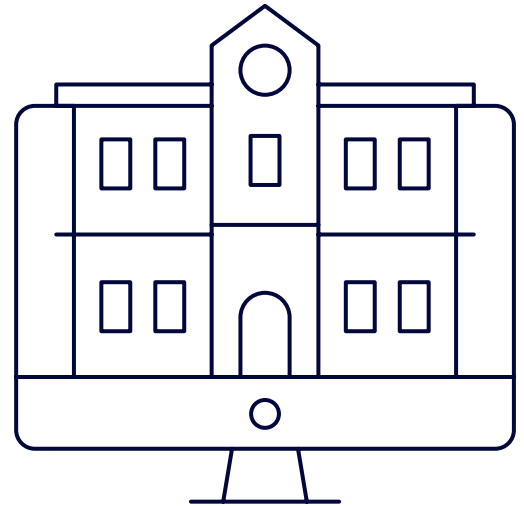
Building employee engagement in education



Introduction

Amid schools' and academies' varying priorities, it's easy to overlook employee engagement. The Coronavirus pandemic has undoubtedly taken a toll on staff members' morale as they've had to adopt different ways of working to manage and mitigate risks for their schools, their pupils and themselves during this period of uncertainty.

This factsheet examines the nature of employee engagement and its relationship to motivation, wellbeing and other aspects of working life. It provides suggestions for measuring and building engagement and outlines the benefits of a more engaged workforce.



What is employee engagement?

In his 1990 research paper “Psychological Conditions of Personal Engagement and Disengagement at Work”, Dr William Kahn, a professor of organisational behaviour at the Questrom School of Business, provided the first formal definition of employee engagement as “the harnessing of an organisation’s members’ selves to their work roles”. When they’re engaged with their work, he said, people employ and express themselves physically, cognitively and emotionally. Because of this, they’re willing to put in discretionary effort, or ‘go the extra mile’.

A more specific view is that of a group of Utrecht University occupational psychologists who define “work engagement” as a state of mind in which employees show vigour (energy, resilience and effort), dedication (enthusiasm, inspiration and pride) and absorption (concentration and being engrossed in one’s work)¹.



What are the benefits of high levels of employee engagement?

Research firmly suggests that employee engagement goes hand in hand with higher performance². When employees experience higher levels of engagement, they also enjoy greater job satisfaction and wellbeing; this is likely to make them more productive, deliver a better service to customers, and be more innovative.

This ‘mutual gains’ view of motivation and people management lies at the heart of employee engagement.



How do I measure employee engagement levels?

The adage that ‘what gets measured gets attention’ holds true, and measurement can identify how different parts of the school / multi academy trust (MAT) compare, how engagement changes over time and what the main factors are that engage or disengage people.

Measuring employee engagement provides a picture of how engaged your staff members currently are and a baseline from which you can assess the effectiveness of your employee engagement interventions.

Gathering employees’ views

What drives, or hinders, people’s commitment or motivation can be different from one school to another, and from one academy to another within one MAT. It’s important that you give your employees effective channels for voicing their views and listen carefully to their concerns and aspirations.

Many employers conduct regular employee surveys, often alongside qualitative methods such as focus groups. A mixed approach is best as different methods have different strengths. Surveys give a representative view of employees’ experiences across the organisation; qualitative methods provide a richer understanding of employees’ experiences in their own words and a deeper insight into why people are happy or unhappy.

HR metrics

To obtain a more holistic view, organisational data such as absences and recruitment and retention, including information obtained in exit interviews, gives you a valuable insight into your school’s strengths and weaknesses and its general performance.

¹ <https://www.uu.nl/en/research/behaviour-in-social-context/research-programmes/work-and-organizational-psychology-occupational-health-psychology>

² <https://engageforsuccess.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/The-Evidence.pdf>



How can I build employee engagement levels?

Successful employee engagement strategies need to be owned by senior leadership teams and should incorporate a range of good people management and learning and development practices. They should focus on employees' motivation and wellbeing, and on helping them to understand their contribution to the school's / MAT's purpose, objectives and values.

In 2009, the "Engaging for Success" study of UK organisations with high employee engagement and high productivity identified four key 'enablers' of employee engagement³:

- 1} **Leadership that gives a "strong strategic narrative about the organisation"**
- 2} **Line managers who motivate, empower and support their team members**
- 3} **Employees throughout the organisation involved in decision making**
- 4} **Values reflected in the organisation's culture: what we say is what we do.**

There doesn't have to be a 'big bang' approach to increasing employee engagement. There are key leadership behaviours that can be adopted immediately and that can make a difference to employees and their engagement. These include:

Being transparent

Alongside announcements about new procedures and protocols, school leaders should regularly share detailed information with employees. Even if information is subject to change, people appreciate being kept in the loop, especially during this uncertain time.

Additionally, outlining clear guidelines and expectations for employees can prepare them to perform well in a changing environment.

Transparent and frequent communications go a long way towards boosting employee engagement in more normal times. They're even more crucial during today's uncertainty.

Embrace flexibility

Schools have needed to adopt new remote and virtual ways of working during 2020. As well as providing employees with the right technology tools and training, leaders need to consider how much contact they maintain with team members who are working remotely.

Scheduling regular check-ins can ensure that people feel supported and have an opportunity to discuss their concerns and identify ways to improve their working arrangements.

Team support

Establishing forums in which employees can support each other, ask questions and seek solutions to common problems empowers them to develop workable solutions and have a valuable input into how their school operates.

Fostering team working enables leaders to listen to and engage with their employees, which builds trust and improves engagement.



What next?

Make the first steps by reviewing how you currently support employee engagement.

Where are you now? Obtain some HR metrics to allow you to review the impact of your activity and any interventions that you implement.

Where do you want to be? Determine your aspirations as an organisation, consider your vision and values, and make a road map of how you can achieve them. How will you demonstrate your progress and success?

Share this with your leaders and gain their buy-in.

Communicate this to your staff members, and determine how you will keep them updated on progress.

If you would like support from a trusted HR partner, please contact us – we would welcome the opportunity to work with you to make a difference for your employees.

