

Employee Engagement vs. Job Satisfaction

An Issue Worth Reviewing

Given the continued reliance on employee job satisfaction as a key construct in the employee experience space, as well as the recent appearance and fascination with eNPS (employee Net Promoter Score), it's an important time to highlight and reinforce the limitations of satisfaction and the potential advantages of employee engagement. While employee engagement and job satisfaction are related constructs, the two are also quite different, and those differences are critical when it comes to the job of improving workforce performance.



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Certainly, employee engagement is a complex and multifaceted construct; to be assessed accurately, employee engagement requires a multi-item measure. Job satisfaction, on the other hand, can be measured with a single item. However, it's not the added complexity that matters most. What's truly important is the relationship of the measured constructs to individual, team, and organizational outcomes.

Employee attitudes, such as engagement, are important to measure because of the well-founded premise that attitudes drive behavior, and behavior drives results (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975; Rucci, Kirn, & Quinn, 1998). Nearly half a century ago, job satisfaction was the employee attitude thought to be most critical to motivating employees to work hard (Hackman & Oldham, 1974; Spector, 1985). And in fact, research on job satisfaction goes back more than 100 years. As employee research evolved through the 1980s and 1990s, a more complex construct was introduced and labeled as employee engagement. Since then, employee engagement has emerged as a much more powerful tool to measure vital aspects of employee sentiment. Satisfaction may be considered a necessary condition for engagement – just as clear lungs are a necessary condition for good health. However, engagement also includes the more critical factors like employees' pride, commitment, and conscientiousness in the workplace.

The Importance of Employee Engagement Surveys

For many organizations, employee feedback, listening, and survey programs have gone from a "nice-to-have" to being a required tool for establishing a competitive advantage. The best and most important reason to do an employee survey is almost always to identify the factors that contribute to the engagement and experience of employees. By identifying and focusing on the factors and issues most related to engagement, organizations can inspire employees to work harder, stay with the organization longer, and care more for the customer. In other words, organizations can leverage employee surveys to gather feedback from employees and take focused action to not only create a more positive employee experience but also motivate employees to do their best work.

For an employee listening program to provide valuable insight that will contribute to a company's success, the right things must be appropriately measured. Of the many employee attitudes that can be measured, few tend to generalize across organizations and settings as well as engagement for driving a successful and high performing organization.

Defining Employee Engagement

To design an effective engagement survey process, there is a very practical way of thinking about employee engagement.

It is about those factors that managers and leaders, at any level of an organization, can impact or control that influence their employees to want to work harder, stay longer, and care more (i.e., enhanced motivation, intent to stay, and commitment/responsibility). Getting more precise, the following definition has served us well:

Engagement is the extent to which employees are motivated to contribute to organizational success and are willing to apply discretionary effort to accomplish tasks important to the achievement of organizational goals.

This definition is much more likely to focus managers on those issues that can have the greatest impact on organizational performance. However, on our most effective surveys, we never attempt to measure all the possible factors that impact or drive engagement. After all, employees have personal lives and therefore will always have other motivators or distractors that managers and leaders have absolutely no control over.

The WSA Employee Engagement Model

The WSA employee engagement model was founded upon the broad existing knowledge base and empirical research of the behavioral sciences, specifically from the fields of organizational behavior, industrial and organizational psychology, and personnel motivation and morale. Our model shares common themes with other engagement measurement models, including enthusiasm for work, commitment, organizational pride, alignment with organizational goals, and a willingness to apply discretionary effort (Robinson, 2007; Schneider, Macey, Barbera, & Martin, 2009; Vance, 2006).

The WSA model of engagement measures satisfaction, advocacy, commitment, and pride. However, it's not just the constructs that matter. The exact wording of each item can make all the difference. [Visit our website to learn more about the engagement index.](#)

- **Satisfaction:** Overall, I am extremely satisfied with this company as a place to work.
- **Advocacy:** I would gladly recommend this company as a place to work to people I know and respect.
- **Commitment:** I rarely think about looking for a new job with another company.
- **Pride:** I am proud to work for this company.



It's worth noting that our extensive research and experimentation has ruled out utilizing the construct of discretionary effort as a point of measurement. Although the construct of discretionary effort is arguably the most important near-term outcome of employee engagement, it has proven to be a terribly flawed concept to measure through self-report on a survey for at least two reasons. First, most people simply aren't objective enough when it comes to rating their own effort. After all, we all learned early on to always give one-hundred-and-ten percent, right? Second, when employees are truly disengaged, their work often feels more difficult and more demanding of extra effort. These two factors completely muddy the scoring and make the analysis of the data unnecessarily confusing.

Our approach to measuring employee engagement treats engagement as a desired state (Macey & Schneider, 2008) and is measured as an equally weighted combination of the four aforementioned items. Together, these four components of engagement instill a sense of psychological ownership. Unlike job satisfaction, which is a singular construct, engagement is a multifaceted construct with more complexity than can be measured with a single item. In our conceptualization, employee engagement is a result of organizational policies and practices, as well as leadership and managerial behaviors that precede the state of employee engagement. The state of engagement also precedes the display of discretionary effort that

promotes heightened individual, team, and organizational performance.

WSA views engagement as an outcome measure, and the four items that make up the engagement index are not directly actionable. Therefore, we use a survey-key-driver analysis approach to determine which aspects of the employee experience have the greatest impact on levels of engagement. When the drivers of engagement are optimized, employee engagement itself increases. WSA research has consistently shown that engagement has a significant and predictable positive impact on employee behaviors as well as organizational outcome metrics. Our findings resemble those of other empirical studies which found employee engagement can be leveraged to drive positive organizational outcomes such as improved work performance, higher employee retention, greater customer satisfaction, and improved financial performance (Harter, Schmidt, & Hayes, 2002). In addition, highly engaged workers miss work less often, provide higher quality service, require less frequent training, and have lower worker's compensation and accident claims.

The Key Differences Between Employee Engagement and Job Satisfaction

So how does job satisfaction differ from employee engagement? Job satisfaction has been defined as the degree to which employees are content with their job, comprising an attitude, emotional state,

or affective reaction (Brief & Weiss, 2002). While satisfaction is a component of the WSA engagement model, research supports that satisfaction alone is not as powerful of a predictor of individual and company performance as is engagement. Satisfaction is necessary, but it is an insufficient condition for engagement. Instead, job satisfaction can be considered an antecedent for the state of engagement to occur (Penna, 2007). When employees are truly engaged, they can tolerate limited periods of lower job satisfaction and stay highly committed. Rather than a focus only on job satisfaction, our model more broadly measures organizational satisfaction, advocacy, commitment, and pride.

Satisfaction, though important, is inadequate if a goal of the survey process is to increase workforce performance. To illustrate, let's use an example. It turns out that lazy people really do exist in the world. "Couch potatoes" are out there, and many of them find their way into our workforces. Do you really want to satisfy them? If the answer is yes, then just lower the expectations and decrease the workload. Let them play video games or scroll their social media accounts. But of course, you

actually don't want that! As stated earlier, our engagement index contains a satisfaction item. And like our other engagement index items, it utilizes extreme wording. Satisfaction tends to be about the head – "Yeah, my job is okay". Engagement tends to be more about the heart – "I really love this company," and represents a robust combination of attitudes that has a more consistent and predictable impact on behavior.

If you rely on mere satisfaction to identify priorities, then you will be much more likely to end up identifying factors that are more about minimum criteria. Whereas, if you rely on more extreme wording, you are much more likely to identify factors that really capture employee commitment and tap into what makes them highly motivated.

Therefore, job satisfaction alone may have little influence on employees' motivation to go above and beyond for the company, to work harder, be more committed, or be any more conscientious. Engagement, on the other hand, has demonstrated its potency as a construct with a meaningful positive impact on these outcomes.

About WSA

We believe in the power of applying the right science to make people and organizations successful. We believe in empowering businesses to measure what matters when it matters — so they, in turn, can motivate their people to work harder, stay longer, and care more. We believe that behavioral science is the ingredient for ensuring that employees stay focused on the right things, at the right time, and with the right momentum. We believe that employees' lives are never better than when they are highly engaged and using their talents to contribute to a company they believe in. And we know that you need a partner who has workforce performance down to a science.

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