
2023

RESEARCH PAPER



State of the Workforce Engagement Trends

A brief look into 2022

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The “New Normal” Looks Different For Every Organization

A “new normal.” What does it look like? Are we there yet? Will we know when we arrive? Over the past few years, we have all been wondering what a “new normal” looks like, particularly from a work perspective. Many organizations have successfully adjusted and thrived in their version of a “new normal.” Likewise, there are organizations that remain lost, and undeniably, there is a substantial percentage of companies that are still finding their path.

What we have come to understand with certainty is that the “new normal” looks different for everyone and every organization. That said, one fundamental goal that should unite the efforts of organizations across the globe is to continue to foster a culture that engages, motivates, inspires, and retains their most important asset—their people.

Engagement is Adjusting and Stabilizing

Leaders have eagerly awaited to see what would happen to engagement levels after observing a massive spike in engagement during 2020, followed by a subsequent roller coaster decline in 2021. The question became whether engagement would continue to fall or whether it would stabilize as this “new normal” becomes established. And perhaps more importantly, what are key levers that managers and leaders can pull to optimally engage their workforce and drive organizational performance based upon the current landscape?

Workforce Science Associates (WSA) has continued to build one of the most comprehensive databases of employee research in the world (*WSAdata*). During the past three years, WSA has administered 586 census survey projects, capturing 153 million survey responses across 151 countries around the globe. Each year, we continue to add tens of millions of individual responses to this three-year rolling database. WSA has leveraged this data to analyze the most recent engagement trends as well as identify the most relevant factors that are driving engagement – these key drivers motivate your workforce to work harder, care more and stay longer.

We have heard the story of how engagement declined in 2021 ([An Analysis of Employee Experience Feedback](#)), as this was both predictable and inevitable based on the anomaly year that was 2020. Some may have interpreted the decline in 2021 as a negative sign; however, after integrating what we know from the 2022 engagement data we find that engagement trends were merely adjusting to the “new normal.” From an engagement perspective, this means regressing to pre-pandemic levels.

Just as employee engagement had been quite stable between the years of 2015 and 2019, we are seeing a similar pattern emerge in 2021 and 2022. Engagement, while increasing ever so slightly, has held relatively steady. When reviewing bi-annually, we found that engagement hit its lowest level in the second half of 2021 after declining from the peak experienced in the second half of 2020. Since bottoming out in the second half of 2021, engagement has increased slightly and appears to have stabilized within

pre-pandemic levels. While many organizations have improved during 2022, 2023 brings new uncertainty which will be closely monitored as credible sources tout an impending recession and many large brands have been in lock-step announcing workforce reductions to right their ships. Further research is being done regarding the Manager Effectiveness trend which will be included in a larger study that will focus solely on Manager Effectiveness, and it will be released later this year.

Trends in Engagement and Manager Effectiveness

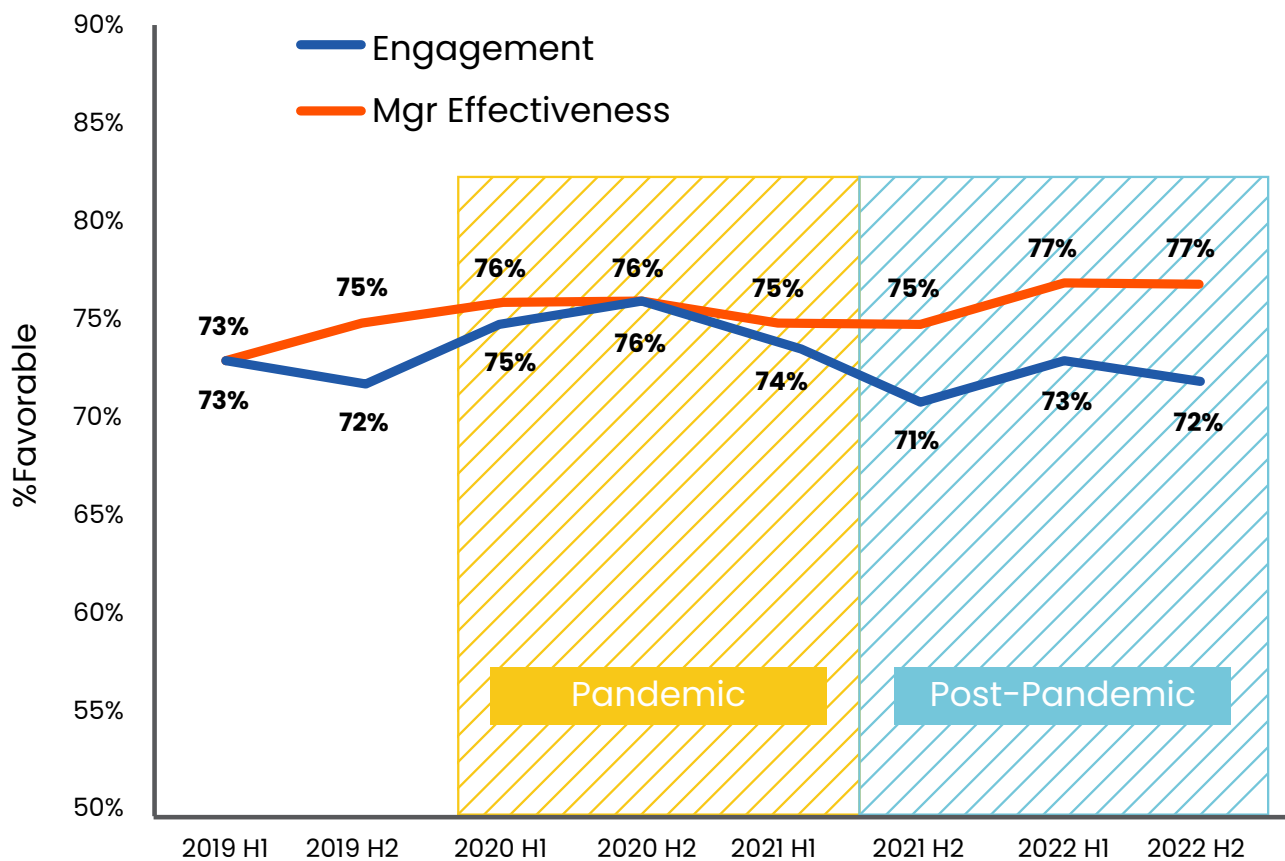


Figure 1. Half-yearly engagement trends

Analyzing Key Drivers of Engagement

Regardless of the times and the economic conditions, our decades of research have consistently shown that there are fundamental drivers of engagement that generally show up regardless of organization size, industry, or country/culture. These fundamental drivers of engagement continue to be the foundational tenets of the employee–employer relationship. While a comprehensive description of these aspects is beyond this work’s scope, we know that the relative importance and nuances of these drivers tend to change over time based on the prevailing environment and landscape. A particular pattern we have seen over time is the shift of priority order for key drivers during more or less turbulent times. While current global conditions would certainly not be described as “easy,” “ideal,” or even “prosperous,” it is safe to say we are not in the same “crisis mode” as we were just a few short years ago.

Just as drivers in the recent past were identified as being consistent with what we tend to see during times of crisis, WSA hypothesized that current key drivers of engagement are likely to have shifted back to what they were prior to the onset of the pandemic—the drivers that focus more on the “self” such as recognition, feeling valued, and growth and development. Our current research is proving that shift to be true; employee feedback is showing us a renewed focus on “self” when it comes to those aspects that make us more motivated, conscientious and committed. Employees want to see, know, and consistently feel “what is in it for me” as they put forth their efforts day in and day out.

2023: The Year for Front Line Leaders

The World's Top Drivers of Engagement			
Priority Item	During Pandemic Rank	After Pandemic Rank	+/- Change
Overall, I feel that my career goals can be met at this company.	6	1	+5
Senior leadership demonstrates that employees are important to the success of this company.	9	1	+8
This organization's management shows genuine interest in the well-being of employees.	2	1	+1
I feel as if I belong here.	3	4	-1
I believe this company has an outstanding future.	4	5	-1
I trust the senior leadership of this company.	1	6	-5
Senior leadership of this company has communicated a vision of the future that motivates me.	8	7	+1
This company values my contribution.	5	8	-3
There is open and honest two-way communication at this company.	11	9	+2
The behavior of our senior leadership team is consistent with this company's values.	12	10	+2
I have confidence in the leadership team to make the right decisions for this company.	6	11	-5
My work gives me a feeling of personal accomplishment.	14	12	+2
I can see a clear link between my work and this company's vision.	10	13	-3
I feel supported in my efforts to adapt to organizational changes.	13	14	-1
The senior leadership of this company is committed to ethical business practices and conduct.	16	15	+1

During = Pandemic Time frame: Jan 2020 – June 2021

After = Post Pandemic Time frame: July 2021 – Dec 2022

Figure 2. Drivers of engagement during and post-pandemic

Figure 2 shows the current top drivers of engagement now compared to what they were during the pandemic. While most items are included in both lists, we can see that the priority order has shifted in terms of what is most important to employees. Currently, employees feeling as if their their career goals can be met, being shown by senior leaders that they are important to the company's success, and that their well-being is a focus of leaders are the predominant factors

influencing engagement. "Senior leadership demonstrating that employees are important to the success of the company" went from the ninth-ranked key driver to tied for first—an item directly linked to how valued an employee feels. "Overall, I feel that my career goals can be met at this company" increased from the sixth-ranked driver to also being tied for first, which is another concept focused solely on the "self."

Over the past several years, employees have stepped up to the plate and delivered for their organizations in a time of crisis. They were asked to work longer hours and in many cases, carry heavier workloads due to some of the highest levels of attrition the workforce has ever experienced. Employees gave organizations their all, and throughout this time, some of the most critical factors driving engagement were about employees' trust and confidence in senior leadership to successfully navigate the turbulence—concepts more related to the broader organization's viability than the individual self. While these factors are most certainly still important (especially as people are watching to see how leaders manage workforce reductions), they are not at the very top of the list. As seen in Figure 2, "I trust the senior leadership of this company" was the top driver of engagement previously, though it is now ranked sixth in the list. Similarly, the item "I have confidence in the leadership team to make the right decisions for the company" has moved from the rank of number six to eleventh.

Conclusion

While engagement has appeared to stabilize, attitudes of employees toward work and their role within organizations have shifted. After examining the key drivers of engagement both during and post-pandemic, the story is quite clear—employees are ready to shift the focus back to themselves. They want to feel valued and cared for, vividly sense that they are an important part of the company, as well as see a clear path where their career goals can be realized. As employees have always and still need to be inspired by a compelling future vision, that vision must be clearly linked to “what’s in it for me.”

Front-line managers are going to be key in this “new normal,” as they are the closest link to employees within organizations. Managers carry with them an important responsibility of helping employees adapt to the new way of working within their own organization. They are also the individuals who can bring the greatest level of personalization to the employee experience—through regular career conversations that focus on individualized goals and consistent, meaningful individualized recognition. Managers are also given the regular opportunity to demonstrate care for employees, translating people-focused principles and values derived by senior leadership onto employees every single day. With the renewed focus on “self” when it comes to employee engagement, there has never been a more important time to ensure the most effective managers are in place to play this pivotal role.

About WSA

WSA, Workforce Science Associates, offers expertise to maximize the employee experience, enhance leadership effectiveness, and hire the very best talent. This expertise is rooted in ongoing research and behavioral science backed by 40 years of implemented experience. In short, WSA improves workforce performance.

WSA believes in the power of applying the right science that is proven to make people and organizations successful. This includes measuring what matters and equipping leaders with the right solutions to motivate their people to want to work harder, stay longer, and care more. WSA has workforce performance down to a science.

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