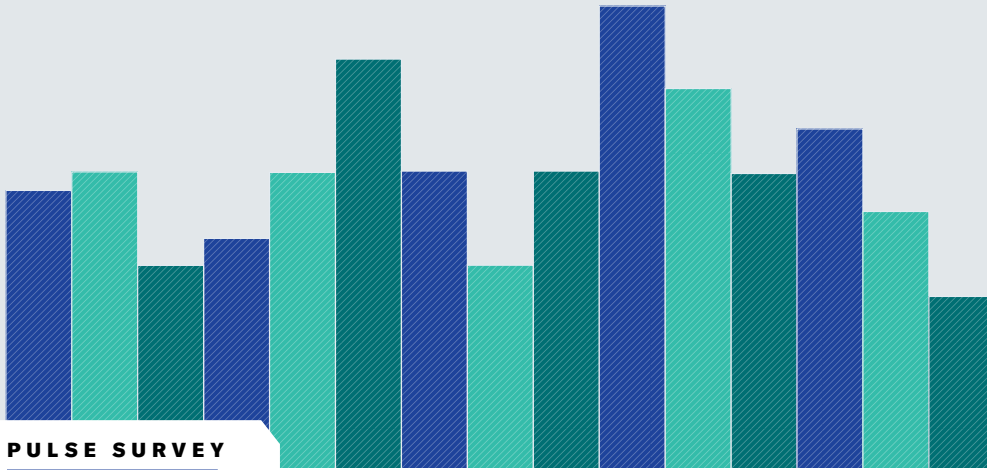




**Harvard  
Business  
Review**

ANALYTIC SERVICES



**PULSE SURVEY**

# Accelerating Employee Engagement with Technology



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## **The blueprint for world-class employee experience has changed.**

Having partnered with hundreds of globally recognized brands to bring digital employee experience visions to life, we have seen firsthand the transformative impact technology can have on employee engagement. We've also seen how poorly implemented and outdated technology can drain engagement and derail progress.

In the post-pandemic workplace, the blueprint for creating a world-class employee experience has changed. Enterprises understand the importance of cultivating workplaces that not only attract new talent but motivate and empower existing employees to operate at their best. But old tactics for engaging employees fall short in our new climate.

Employees today crave connection with their employers; they are motivated by purpose and want to know how they are contributing to meaningful enterprise goals. At the same time, they are more dispersed and disconnected than ever. The rise of hybrid work has introduced new flexibility and work-life balance, but, on the flip side, many employees find themselves feeling isolated from colleagues, struggling to collaborate effectively, and missing out on company dialogue that makes them feel part of something bigger.

Enterprises know that technology is key to overcoming these challenges. Digital employee experience has never been more important; the quality of the digital experiences we serve employees is defining their experience of work. Getting it right is mission critical.

To understand how enterprises can best deploy digital solutions to prime engagement and underpin the new blueprint for world-class employee experience, we sponsored research by Harvard Business Review Analytic Services to investigate the role of technology in accelerating employee engagement.

The results of the study show that enterprises recognize the critical nature of digital in creating the best places to work. From understanding what employees want from their employers to fostering connected cultures that give every individual a sense of belonging, technology has the potential to transform the work lives of employees everywhere. It also shows that enterprises are struggling to bring together their various digital solutions into a cohesive experience that empowers employees instead of overwhelming them. What's clear is that technology is disrupting the employee experience, but not always for good. The potential to revolutionize engagement is there, but execution is everything.

We hope that this report will offer valuable insights to people leaders striving to create inspiring workplaces and answer some burning questions around how technology can unlock employee engagement. It's time to end digital friction, say goodbye to outdated platforms, and give our people the consumer-grade digital experiences they deserve.

# Accelerating Employee Engagement with Technology

Employee engagement is top of mind for company leaders as they plan for the future of work. With the rate of digital transformation continuing to accelerate, including as a response to customers' and employees' new pandemic-era digital expectations, companies are looking to technology to improve the employee experience (EX) and, ultimately, improve business performance. Organizations that give workers the best tools and capabilities—and the digitally enabled environment they demand—will be better positioned to retain key talent, attract new talent, and see benefits in areas like productivity, creativity, and customer satisfaction.

Responses from a survey of 492 executives by Harvard Business Review Analytic Services suggest that there is, indeed, an association between the use of digital tools and employee engagement. Respondents whose organizations have high-quality digital tools in place to the greatest extent are the most likely to say their organization also has strong employee engagement (66%), compared with those that have them in place to a moderate (56%) or small/no extent (41%). **FIGURE 1** In addition, respondents who say their organization has strong engagement are much more likely to agree that their employees have the digital tools they need to get work done effectively, as compared with respondents at organizations with weaker engagement (74% versus 51%).

For many knowledge workers, digital tools have become an essential part of how they do their jobs, communicate and collaborate with their teams, learn job skills, and even receive recognition for their work. As companies continue to upgrade and expand their technology infrastructures, executives must

## HIGHLIGHTS



91% of survey respondents say **high-quality digital tools** are extremely, very, or moderately important to employee experience, but only 57% agree their organization's employees have digital tools that create a positive work environment and make them feel engaged.



79% say that **having strong employee engagement** is a high or extremely high priority for their organization.



66% of respondents whose organizations have high-quality digital tools in place to a great extent **say their organization has strong employee engagement**—a result 25 percentage points higher than for low users.

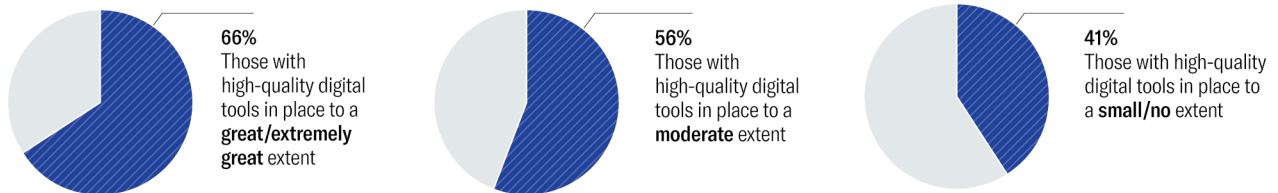
Due to rounding, some figures in this report may not add up to 100%.

FIGURE 1

## Linking Digital Tools and Engagement

Respondents who say their company has high-quality tools in place to a great extent are the most likely to agree the company has strong engagement

Percent agreeing with the statement “My organization has strong employee engagement”



Source: Harvard Business Review Analytic Services survey, June 2022

carefully and thoughtfully deploy digital tools to ensure that employees have what they need to be productive and grow in their careers. They should keep in mind, too, that simply offering digital tools isn't enough—the goal is to have a group of tools that collectively provide a smooth, efficient digital experience for employees as they do their jobs.

“It's not a matter of how many tools you can buy,” says Gene Phifer, founder of Plano, Texas-based TACLE Advisory, a research and consulting firm. “It's a matter of having an effective set of tools that work together—and the working together has not been there historically.”

At the same time, digital tools can be a core part of employee engagement efforts. Executives can use them, for example, to listen to and gather feedback from employees on their wants, and to stay on top of changing needs over time. Digital tools are also useful for collecting and analyzing employee data, such as when measuring engagement levels and looking for areas where people aren't satisfied with their work experience. And because digital touches so many aspects of employees' jobs, it can be useful to take an omnichannel approach to assessing employee engagement and consider all aspects of digital experience—from the computers people use to whether the corporate intranet is helpful and easy to navigate.

The breadth of these kinds of initiatives shows why engagement has to be a companywide effort that has support from top leadership and collaboration from functions across the organization, according to Jennifer Sproul, chief executive at the Institute of Internal Communication, the only professional body solely dedicated to internal communications in the United Kingdom. “True engagement comes from every facet of the organization, so in terms of

digging into that data and then being able to produce change, that will be collaborative,” she says.

This report explores the importance of using digital tools to drive better employee engagement and how technology can play a key role in increasing it. It covers how the enhanced digitalization of the workplace presents new challenges organizations must overcome in improving engagement, as well as opportunities to stay up to date on what employees want now. It also discusses ways to accelerate the business benefits of increasing engagement, the strategies and digital tools organizations are using to connect with and support employees, the leadership model companies can follow for engagement efforts, and how companies are planning to bolster engagement in the near future.

## The Many Challenges to Improving Engagement

Companies seem to agree that improving engagement has a newfound urgency. In the survey, 79% of respondents say employee engagement is a high or extremely high priority for their organization today. In addition, 80% of respondents say engagement became somewhat or much more important to their organization over the past two years in the wake of the pandemic. Together, these findings show that many executives recognize and understand how critical it is for employees to feel committed to and satisfied with their jobs and companies. “Engagement has often been seen as the holy grail for organizations,” says Sproul.

Perhaps the biggest challenge to improving employee engagement is the many different levers that have to be pulled and how doing so can affect people's experience at work.

According to William Castellano, researcher and professor of human resource management at Rutgers University School of Management and Labor Relations in New Brunswick, N.J., the specifics of engagement vary from company to company and even job to job, but there are three major factors that are always worth thinking about. First is job design, which includes the extent to which employees are challenged by their roles, can learn new skills, and enjoy their day-to-day tasks. Second is what he calls “line of sight,” or whether people can see how their jobs tie into others’ work and the organization’s larger goals—in other words, whether they feel a sense of purpose in what they’re doing. Third is flexibility, the definition of which has evolved greatly in the past few decades, Castellano notes, from adjusting the start and end of the workday to telecommuting to remote or hybrid work in which people come to the office at certain times to collaborate.

“All of these practices are important, but the challenge is the level or the impact that each may have on different components of your workplace,” he says.

These factors take on new meaning as digital transformation, along with the effects of the pandemic, continues to change the nature of jobs—and, in the process, the attributes of employee engagement. While the goals of engagement efforts are largely the same as ever, managers now must understand how employees’ needs are evolving and how technology can help. Remote and hybrid workers, for instance, need the tools to stay connected to colleagues and managers they rarely see, collaborate smoothly with teammates, and give and receive feedback. But technology advances are also reshaping the jobs of many, especially for roles that involve repetitive or low-value tasks that can be automated. In these cases, managers and executives should help people understand the essential things they contribute to the company—including skills such as creativity and critical thinking—and see how greater use of technology can free up their time for higher-value tasks. In a technology-driven workplace, Castellano’s line-of-sight engagement element may be more important than ever because it lets workers connect what they are doing to the organization’s broader goals.

Many executives understand that improving engagement is no small task. In the survey, when respondents were asked how important different aspects of work are to employee experience, every factor listed was cited as “very important” or “extremely important” by over half of respondents—and the top four factors were cited by 85% or more. **FIGURE 2** They include supportive, proactive managers (cited as “very” or “extremely” important to strong employee experience by 91% of respondents); strong internal communications/communicative leadership (88%); welcoming culture (87%); and strong collaboration between employees/teams (85%).

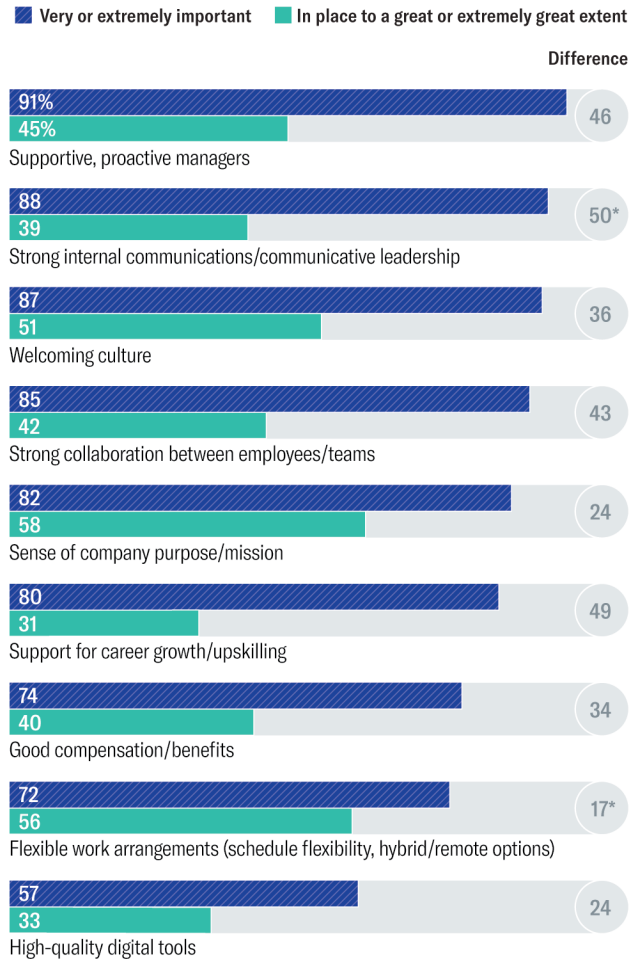
FIGURE 2

## Organizations Are Falling Short on Engagement

Many factors are important, and all need improvement

How important are the following aspects of work for creating a strong employee experience?

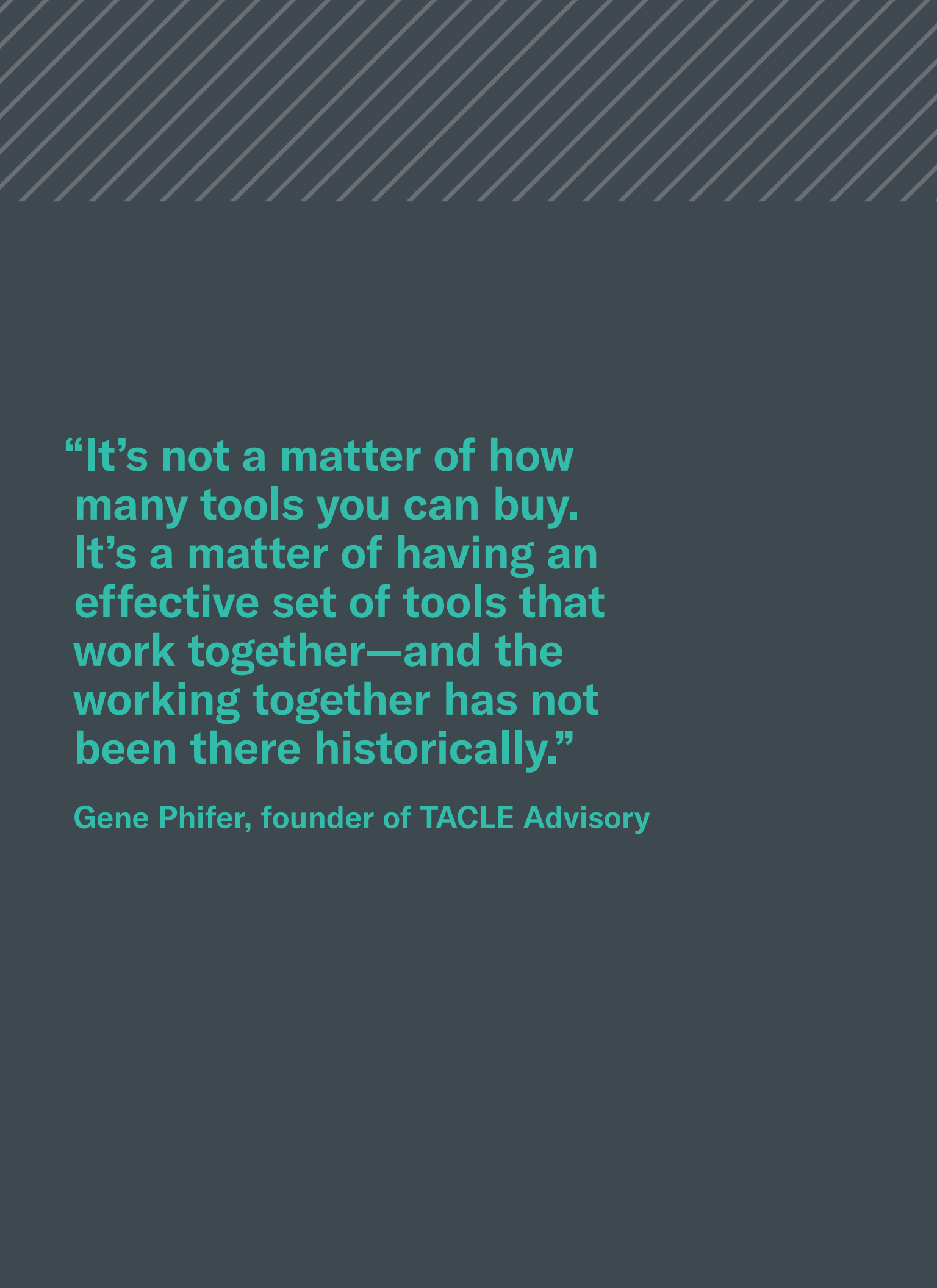
Rate the extent to which your organization has each of these aspects of work in place today.



\*Point differences based on unrounded percentages

Source: Harvard Business Review Analytic Services survey, June 2022

At the same time, respondents are less enthusiastic about their organizations’ success in these areas. For every single factor, there is a double-digit gap between the percentage of respondents who say it is highly important to employee experience and the percentage who say their organization has that factor firmly in place. With strong internal communications/communicative leadership, for instance, there’s a 50-point gap between how many respondents



**“It’s not a matter of how many tools you can buy. It’s a matter of having an effective set of tools that work together—and the working together has not been there historically.”**

**Gene Phifer, founder of TACLE Advisory**



“When people are in a culture where they feel like they’re accepted and can be engaged and are doing their best work, the business outcomes are much more likely to be positive. If people are all pulling the rope hard in the same direction, you’re a lot more likely to win,” says Kerry Christopher, vice president of internal communications at Dublin, Ohio-based Cardinal Health.

recognize its high importance (88%) and how many say their organization has it in place to a great extent today (39%)—the widest chasm among all factors.

Clearly, many know there’s room to improve, and executives should continually think about how these factors connect to digital workplaces. For example, being a proactive manager looks different in a hybrid/remote workplace than in the traditional workplace of the past. When managers and employees don’t have easy access to each other in an office, staying current on what people are working on, what problems are arising, and who may need additional support takes extra effort from team leaders, especially when they’re relying on videoconferencing or collaboration tools.

Similarly, internal communications teams have to figure out how to clearly share information with employees through digital channels, knowing how and where people prefer to be communicated with. And executives at all levels must think about how to maintain a welcoming culture when the workforce is dispersed. As digital transformation offers new tools and options, a digital-focused approach to culture can affect everything from onboarding to collaboration to more agile ways of working. Executives should consider which aspects of culture can be rethought in digital terms.

Two other key challenges when attempting to improve employee engagement are measuring engagement effectively and using the data collected to tie specific engagement efforts to the company’s larger goals, since it isn’t always easy to know which initiatives will affect which outcomes.

Organizations hope to see a variety of benefits from higher engagement, the survey shows, though two stand above the rest: Higher retention/lower turnover (56%) and greater employee satisfaction (50%) are the only goals mentioned by at least half of respondents. The next most-desired outcomes include higher productivity (32%), greater quality of work/innovations (31%), greater collaboration (31%), and greater customer satisfaction (28%). Given the survey’s findings about the connection between engagement and high-quality digital tools, executives should use engagement data to explore areas where new or better tools can make a difference. For example, if workers don’t have the collaboration tools

they need, offering more robust options could improve collaboration and productivity, which could affect turnover and job satisfaction, too.

The survey also shows how the cross-functional nature of engagement efforts may have ripple effects across the business. Respondents whose organizations have high-quality digital tools in place to a high extent are significantly more likely to report having the top three most important engagement capabilities: strong internal communications/communicative leadership (57% of the heavy digital tool users say they have this in place to a great/extremely great extent), a welcoming culture (68%), and strong collaboration between employees/teams (62%). When companies provide the digital tools that people need, it seems they’re likely to be doing other critical aspects of engagement well, too.

The payoff of helping workers be more engaged is substantial, says Kerry Christopher, vice president of internal communications at Dublin, Ohio-based Cardinal Health. “When people are in a culture where they feel like they’re accepted and can be engaged and are doing their best work, the business outcomes are much more likely to be positive,” he says. “If people are all pulling the rope hard in the same direction, you’re a lot more likely to win.”

## Listening with Digital Tools

For technology to have a maximum impact on employee engagement, managers need to understand what their employees want and need to do their jobs better. This process involves not only communicating with employees, but also actually using digital tools to improve that listening process.

For executives who aren’t sure how to start their listening efforts by using technology, Christopher recommends partnering with the internal communications team, which likely has some ideas about using various tools opportunistically. “Internal communications is not just about putting out information and messaging,” he says. “It’s also about helping leaders to be in the right places to hear things, learn, and observe, which ultimately builds trust between leaders and employees.”



Sproul also recommends partnering with employee networks, since building trusting relationships through them can create a pipeline of insights over time. In addition, executives can talk to line managers and tap into their everyday conversations, to ask what kinds of feedback they're hearing that may not be reaching senior leadership.

Executives might also make use of digital channels where conversations are taking place. These channels might include, for example, collaboration platforms, internal and external social media, intranets and employee experience platforms, internal wikis, and external job boards. Digital channels may be especially useful for understanding younger workers, who are likely to be more tech savvy and to use those tools more. Anywhere employees are talking about frustrations, unmet needs, and how well work is (or isn't) getting done may help leaders get a clearer picture of engagement problems.

Technology tools can be especially helpful in gathering insights about engagement, says TACLE Advisory's Phifer. For example, employee analytics can reveal patterns in how people work, including pain points that are preventing them from doing their jobs well. Digital experience monitoring tools can dig into how employees use laptops, mobile devices, and even specific applications to see what they're struggling with. Phifer says this kind of analysis—known as digital experience intelligence—is beginning to incorporate artificial intelligence and machine learning, using data streams about how people work and searching for patterns and problems. The goal, he explains, is to understand the full story of what employees are dealing with day-to-day. "Listen to them, gather that feedback on a regular basis, and see what they're telling you they need to be more effective and engaged," Phifer says.

A digital approach to listening should also include surveying the workforce about engagement topics, as well as tracking how survey results change over time. Castellano says it's essential to keep the wording of questions consistent over time so that answers can be compared, and recommends using three kinds of surveys: annual, instant feedback, and pulse. Annual surveys can offer a broad overview of how the workforce is feeling about various aspects of work. Instant-feedback survey tools can collect quick insights about employees' experience of working on a project with new coworkers, reporting to a particular boss, or interacting with a certain client. Castellano notes these tools are often phone-based apps for easy, simple use. And occasional pulse surveys can help leaders gather comments on specific initiatives, such as a new policy or a training program's effectiveness.

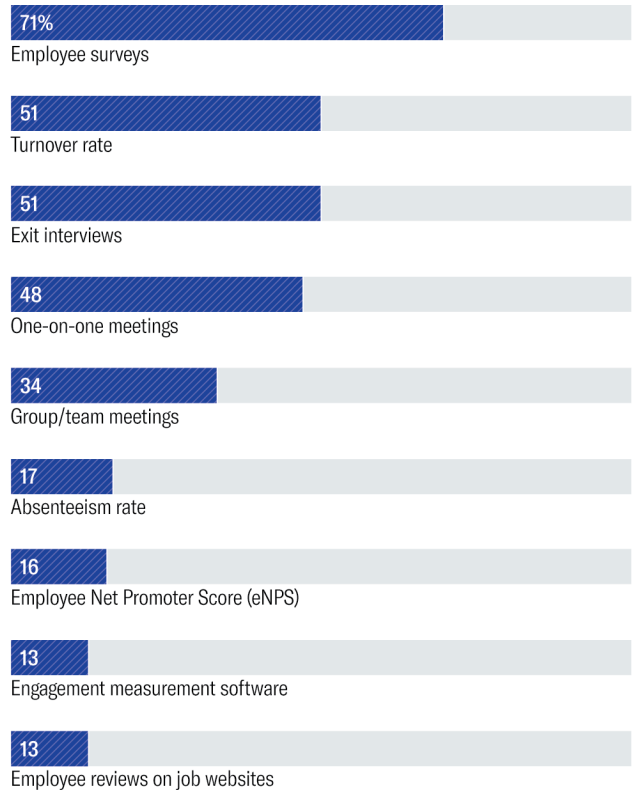
The survey finds that employee surveys are the most common method of measuring employee engagement, with 71% of respondents saying their organization uses them. **FIGURE 3** Other common methods include turnover rate (51%), exit interviews (51%), and one-on-one meetings (48%).

FIGURE 3

## Ways to Measure Employee Engagement

Surveys stand out as the most-used measurement tool

What methods does your organization currently use to measure employee engagement levels? [Select all that apply.]



Source: Harvard Business Review Analytic Services survey, June 2022

The next frontier of collecting and analyzing employee data, according to Phifer, is to organize it with data platforms, the same way companies do with customer data. Currently, firms have several data sources about their employees: HR systems, people management software, intranets, EX platforms, learning tools, expenditures systems, and so on. While employee data platforms—which could pull these data sources into centralized locations, to help executives look for insights and slice data by job types or functions—are not common now, Phifer expects that vendors will be rolling them out in the near future. With data platforms, too, he says, approaches to EX can mirror those of customer experience: In the same way companies combine customer data from various parts of the business, they can combine their employee data streams to have a single source of truth about their people, which they can then use to support and improve employees' work.



## Planning Engagement Interventions

Phifer says analytics tools can help executives search for patterns in employee data. They might, for example, look at who tends to collaborate with whom, or how effectively people use digital tools—and then look for bottlenecks that are preventing work from getting done. This kind of analysis is known as digital experience monitoring, and Phifer says it is helping companies understand the digital side of EX far better than in the past. He adds that artificial intelligence and machine learning can use the data from digital experience monitoring to better dig into how people are, or aren't, able to do their jobs well. Once the problem areas are identified, executives can plan to remove them.

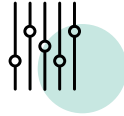
When it comes to which engagement areas to tackle first, Castellano suggests looking at what the data tells you about the company's most strategically important roles. While the ultimate goal is likely to improve engagement for everyone, the most effective interventions are usually those that best align with strategic and financial outcomes, he explains. That means focusing on the issues that affect key roles is a good place to start. "You want to clearly see what are the drivers that are enhancing engagement for those workers in those positions that have the greatest strategic impact on organizational success," he says.

Castellano adds that companies should slice their engagement data by demographics and job types to dig deep into how needs differ among groups. "If you're just analyzing the data at an aggregate level, you're not going to be able to have as great an impact on the strategic and financial outcomes," he says.

According to the survey, organizations plan to increase efforts in many experience-related areas in the next year, starting with strong internal communications—the top answer, with nearly half (49%) of respondents mentioning it. Other key areas of focus for the next year are support for career growth/upskilling (44%); strong collaboration between employees/teams (44%); flexible work arrangements (40%); and supportive, proactive managers (38%). These findings indicate that many organizations are investing in helping employees do their jobs well and keeping them informed about key information and updates.

## Investing in Digital Tools for Greater Engagement

Sproul recommends that companies take an omnichannel approach to tech-based engagement. Executives are likely familiar with omnichannel approaches to how the company connects with customers, offering ways to interact across platforms and communication methods, both online and offline. The same kind of thinking should apply, she says, to how leaders connect with their employees. She has seen



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companies use everything from videos, podcasting, and town halls to internal TV channels and social media to help executives share information and connect with the workforce. "Really make sure that employees understand what's happening, why it's happening, and make leadership more visible and more human," she says.

Management should think carefully about where digital tools can best support their engagement efforts, depending on their goals. Although the survey finds these tools to be a relatively lower area of focus for the next year, digital is an increasingly key part of how employees get work done and interact with each other and various aspects of their jobs, so it should factor into engagement plans whenever relevant. For example, the survey's top four areas of increased investment specifically for digital tools—learning/training tools (42%), performance management/feedback (36%), collaboration tools (34%), and communication/messaging tools (28%)—align with the four types of tools that respondents say are the most important for creating a strong digital experience. **FIGURE 4**

In addition, there seems to be a further connection between engagement and tools for learning and training. Survey respondents who report strong engagement are more likely than other respondents (who either disagreed with or were neutral on that statement) to report that their organization is increasing investment in learning/training tools for employee engagement (49% versus 34%).

Offering opportunities to grow is likely to only become more important—to both employees and companies—since learning new skills and retraining workers will be key parts of preparing workforces for the future. According to an August 2022 survey of 3,000 employees by Boston-based

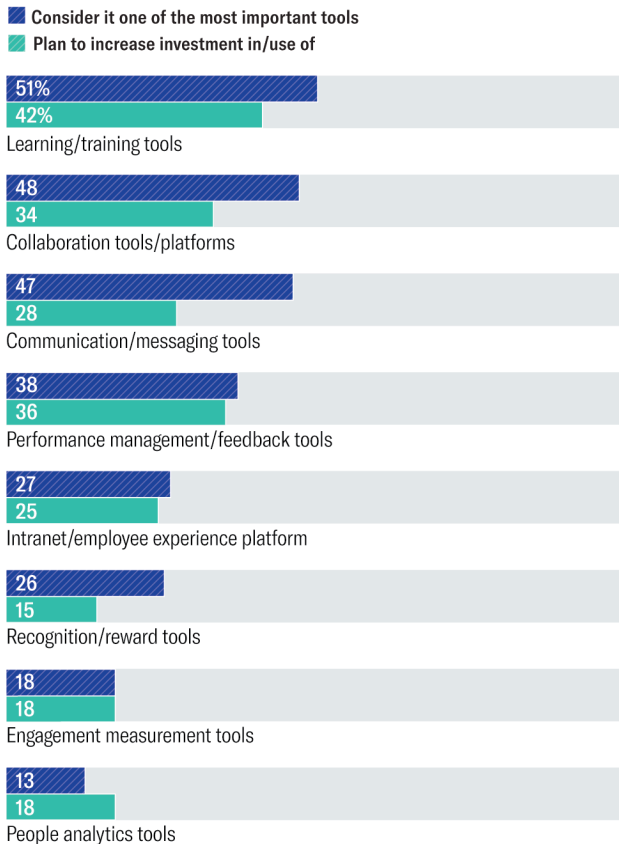
FIGURE 4

## Digital Tools for a Strong Digital Experience

Learning/training tools are most important and will attract more investment

Which of the following employee engagement tools are the most important for creating a strong digital experience for employees? [Select up to three.]

Over the next 12 months, which of these digital tools is your organization increasing its investment in/use of for employee engagement? [Select all that apply.]



Source: Harvard Business Review Analytic Services survey, June 2022

HR research and advisory firm Workplace Intelligence and Seattle-based tech company Amazon, 78% of respondents feel they lack the skills to advance in their careers, and 70% feel unprepared for the future of work. These issues are particularly pronounced for younger workers: 74% say they are likely to quit in the next year due to a lack of skills development opportunities.<sup>1</sup>

Meanwhile, although the vast majority (91%) of respondents in the Harvard Business Review Analytic Services survey say high-quality digital tools are extremely, very, or moderately important to employee experience, only 57% agree that employees at their organization currently have digital tools

that create a positive work environment and make them feel engaged. In other words, leaders seem to grasp the importance of digital tools and where those tools can provide the solutions that employees need, but there's room for improvement with adoption.

A key aspect of investing in the right tools, according to Phifer, is tying investments to work processes that experience issues. A common problem area, he says, is when work is handed off or information is shared between two groups. All too often key details or deadlines are not communicated well, which can affect the quality, timeline, and delivery of the project.

Investing in good collaboration and project management platforms can help ensure that crucial information isn't missed. To address these kinds of issues, Phifer adds, the platforms can integrate various tools in one place, offering a collaboration experience that combines data and work processes that need to be shared across the organization. "These platforms tie together the processes and journeys so they're not disconnected like they used to be," he says.

Making digital workflows easier to navigate is particularly important since executives may be tempted to simply throw more digital tools at collaboration problems, rather than considering how to actually make collaboration smoother for employees. As tools proliferate in organizations, "digital friction"—the amount of unnecessary effort people expend when using technology—increases, too.

For example, a 2022 study of three *Fortune* 500 companies conducted by Boston-based technology company Soroco and McLean, Va.-based food manufacturer Mars Inc. found that constantly switching between digital applications requires significant cognitive effort. On average, according to the study, employees spend a little over two seconds reorienting themselves after toggling between applications; over an entire year, that seemingly small amount of digital friction adds up to 9% of their time at work.<sup>2</sup> Executives looking to improve digital workflows, and engagement in turn, should keep the cost of digital friction in mind—including the frustration and burnout it can lead to.

Christopher says another area of digital need that many companies overlook is their intranet. Executives who are reluctant to invest resources in improving a website that's internal rather than customer-facing, he says, should think about the wasted time that a bad intranet can cause. After all, the site is meant to be a hub of useful information about everything from benefits to company updates. "If one person spends 15 minutes looking for some information and can't find it, not only did you pay them for 15 minutes of not doing anything, but they also don't have that information they need to do their job," he says.

The intranet is also a key area of investment because it represents the organization to employees. If the site has



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underwhelming stories, a lack of pictures or video, or typos in the content, or if it’s simply hard to navigate or isn’t visually appealing, employees are likely to feel that decision makers aren’t prioritizing their experience or needs, given that employees are the intranet’s main audience and users.

Christopher likens the site to a company’s lobby in how it stands in for the company to observers. Many executives wouldn’t think twice about spending money to make the lobby of their corporate headquarters more impressive, because they want customers and visitors to be wowed, he points out—and the same should be true of the intranet. “If the intranet isn’t very good, there’s a negative impression there,” he says, “probably the same as if you walked into the lobby and there was junk everywhere.” That’s why executives should ensure that the site has sufficient investment and staffing support to actually be useful—and enjoyable to use.

Finally, he recommends bolstering the intranet because having a great one can be a point of pride for employees. When it comes to the company’s public website, for example, many executives would likely agree that the site should be welcoming, easy to navigate, and informative. Christopher says that an intranet should mirror that experience for employees internally since the site reflects the company’s identity. “When people open the intranet, they understand that ‘this is what my company looks like,’” he says. “I would always look at the external website and say the internal website should be equally as impressive for that reason.”

And as leaders put engagement plans in place, Christopher adds, they shouldn’t forget to communicate—and keep communicating—to employees about what is changing and why. Even if new technology and tools will benefit workers, it’s easy for that news to get lost amid all the other information they’re flooded with every day. Internal communications teams and executives should clearly relate the benefits of technology and how to use it. “Inside any big organization ... there’s hundreds and hundreds of messages that are coming at you from every direction,” he points out. “Leaders need to stay focused on a simple set of messages over a long period of time for people to really understand the importance of what’s changing and have time to internalize it.” After all, if employees don’t understand how to use the

technology available to them, or why they should, they—and the company—won’t get its full benefits.

### Leading Engagement Efforts

Any effort to improve engagement has to start with the backing of senior executives, since that will show employees the company is serious about effecting change, Castellano says. “You always need senior management support. Nothing like this is going to really make a difference if it’s not coming from senior management.”

It’s also important to make sure that executives and managers are trained in the skills and styles to lead teams well in technology-driven work environments. Christopher points out that what it means to be a people leader today is different from a few years ago, given the rise of remote and hybrid work. Employees are more dispersed and may rarely see their colleagues and managers, which creates new challenges for bosses around connecting with and supporting them—and often having to do so through collaboration tools or videoconferencing. Managers need to know how best to approach these new environments and how to use digital tools to bring people together. “It takes training for leaders around how to be a lot more deliberate when it comes to communication, connecting with people, and helping people collaborate,” Christopher says.

To enable these efforts, companies need the right digital tools to support good collaboration and communication, whether that means investing in collaboration platforms, new messaging tools, employee experience platforms, or other types of tools that make work easier. And to equip people with the right tools, executives have to know what the employees are struggling with and where the greatest needs are. The scale of that challenge shows why improving employee engagement has to be a collaborative initiative, one that calls on the expertise of managers and executives across the business. Individual departments and managers likely already have a good perspective on problems and opportunities related to their workers, which means they can bring essential technology-related insights to the larger effort.

For the day-to-day work of planning and carrying out engagement improvements, Sproul says initiatives will necessarily be cross-functional and collaborative. Some companies may leave engagement to one function, such as HR or internal communications, but while those teams should be centrally involved, engagement is too big an effort for any function to handle alone. “Creating a strategy that addresses the issues in the organization ... and measuring outcomes at the end is a mammoth task,” she says.

The best role for HR is to provide a high-level perspective on the overall engagement strategy, including where digital tools are lacking and where they can play a bigger role in employees’ work, Castellano says. HR teams should be closely involved in interpreting survey results and coming up with strategies around which drivers, policies, and practices should be implemented or adjusted. Additionally, he says, HR can keep tabs on what different departments are doing, which helps with determining whether an engagement initiative or a particular digital tool should be focused on one function or rolled out more broadly. “HR plays that role of looking at which of these practices you should be considering implementing across the entire organization,” he explains.

HR and internal communications should also partner to be effective, says Christopher, since he’s seen that many companies have someone from the communications team as the point person for engagement. This role often works closely with HR and also with legal, which can ensure that messaging complies with company policies. HR and internal communications executives will likely find it useful to work closely with the IT department, as well, since IT can offer guidance on new technologies and provide insights on how different tools can support employees’ work. Jointly, these cross-functional teams can form what he calls a steering committee for leading engagement efforts. “Without that team, everyone is going to run off and do things in their own silo, and they’ll step on each other’s toes,” he says.

## Conclusion

Executives who want to improve engagement in their companies have a number of tasks to execute on. They must ensure employees have the digital tools necessary for getting work done and collaborating with coworkers effectively. They also must invest in digital tools that help them listen to employee needs, collect and analyze engagement data, and support an omnichannel approach to strengthening engagement. Further, they need to understand the different challenges involved in improving engagement and get a robust picture of the current engagement outlook. Finally, they should decide where to target engagement efforts, invest in digital tools and other interventions that can make a difference, and ensure various initiatives are aligned and focused on the right areas.

Improving engagement is no small undertaking, and it’s likely to be a long-term effort. But executives can’t let the size of the task deter them from getting started—helping people feel more engaged is a goal with real urgency behind it.

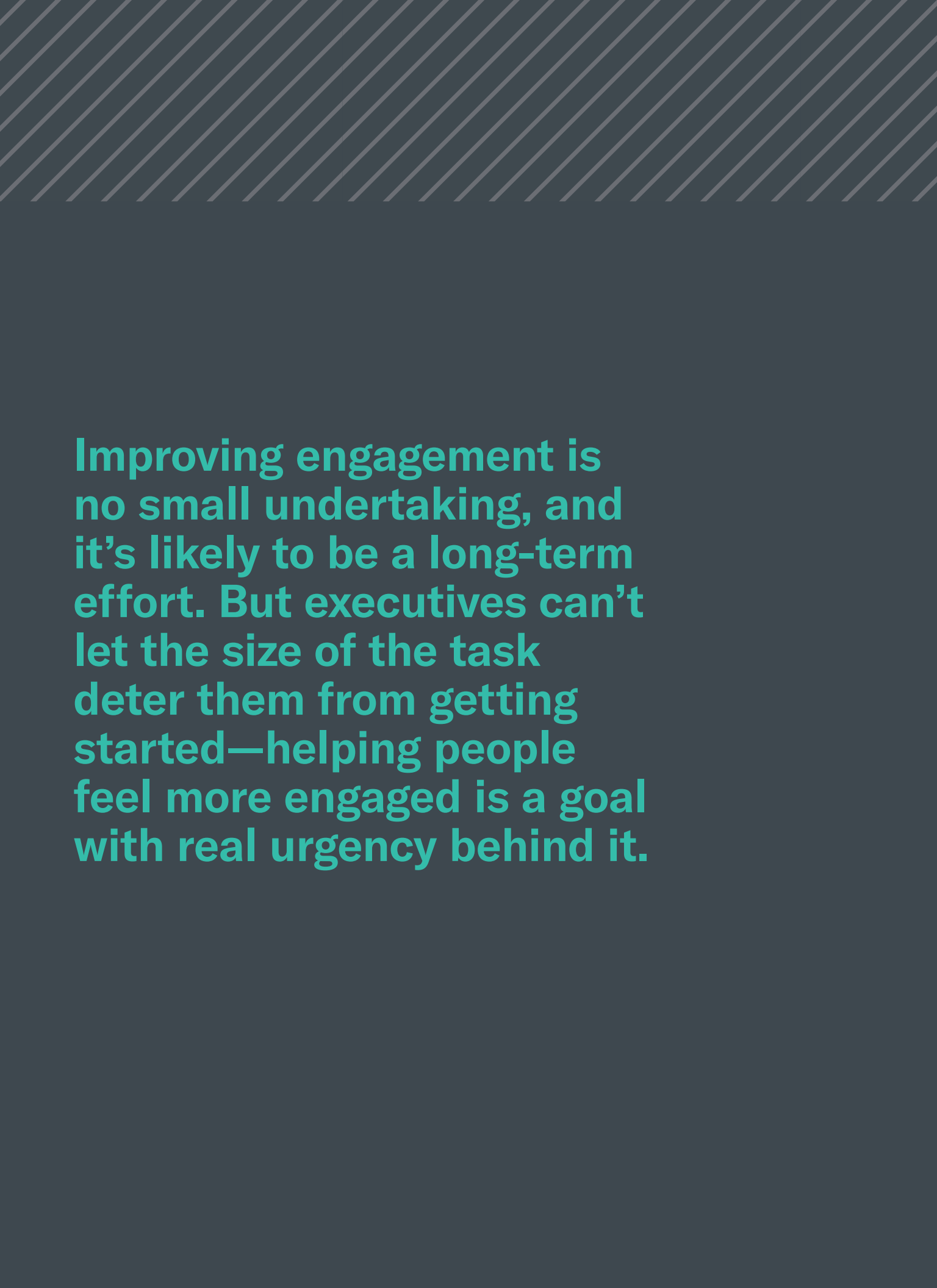
“If people don’t believe in what you’re doing, don’t trust the leaders, aren’t committed to the mission of the company, then they’re there for the wrong reasons,” Christopher says. “They may be there just because they have to get a paycheck, but that’s not going to inspire greatness.”

And as they work to improve employees’ digital experience and engagement across the organization, executives must resist the urge to view it as just another business metric to meet, and keep the human element in mind at all times. After all, the goal isn’t just to score highly on engagement metrics—it’s to help people feel connected to the company’s purpose and equipped with the tools and technology that will help them do great work to support it.

“Engagement is fundamentally about building trust, having integrity, building psychological safety and feedback loops, and communicating honestly and authentically,” Sproul says. “And those are the assets that I think make an organization turn.”

## Endnotes

- 1 Workplace Intelligence, “Upskilling Study,” October 27, 2022. <http://workplaceintelligence.com/upskilling-study/>.
- 2 Rohan Narayana Murty, Sandeep Dadlani, and Rajath B. Das, “How Much Time and Energy Do We Waste Toggling Between Applications?” *Harvard Business Review*, August 29, 2022. <https://hbr.org/2022/08/how-much-time-and-energy-do-we-waste-toggling-between-applications>.



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## METHODOLOGY AND PARTICIPANT PROFILE

Harvard Business Review Analytic Services surveyed 492 members of the *Harvard Business Review* audience via an online survey fielded in June 2022. Respondents qualified to complete the survey if they were familiar with their organization's prioritization of employee engagement.

### Size of Organization

**21%**  
10,000 or more employees

**31%**  
1,000–9,999 employees

**11%**  
500–999 employees

**27%**  
100–499 employees

**10%**  
50–99 employees

### Seniority

**27%**  
Executive management/  
board members

**48%**  
Senior management

**22%**  
Middle management

**3%**  
Other grades

### Industry Sectors

**13%**  
Manufacturing

**12%**  
Technology

**11%**  
Government/  
not-for-profit

**10%**  
Business/  
professional services

**10%**  
Financial services

All other sectors  
less than 10% each

### Job Functions

**27%**  
General/  
executive management

**20%**  
HR/training

**8%**  
Operations/  
production/  
manufacturing

All other functions  
less than 8% each

### Regions

**49%**  
North America

**22%**  
Europe

**15%**  
Asia Pacific

**8%**  
Latin America

**5%**  
Middle East/Africa

**1%**  
Other

Figures may not add up to 100% due to rounding.





# Harvard Business Review

ANALYTIC SERVICES

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