

# The Engagement Dilemma

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Engaging and retaining employees  
in an environment of job hopping,  
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**ECCO** CONSULTING

# The Engagement Dilemma: Engaging and retaining employees in an environment of job hopping, quiet quitting, and remote work

It has never been more difficult for those who manage a team in a post-COVID workplace, especially when it comes to engaging and retaining employees. National engagement surveys find that a smaller percentage of workers are engaged at their jobs, while the number of those who are actively disengaged has increased.<sup>1</sup> Further, managers are feeling the pinch between expectations of leadership and a workforce that is rewriting the rules of longstanding workplace norms, forcing managers to spend more time juggling the priorities of politics than helping their teams hit benchmarks and complete projects.<sup>2</sup>

## The State of Disunion

Gone are the days of training a new hire and being able to rely on their contribution for five or ten years, especially with the most recent generation of employees. Job hopping has never been more prevalent—or more costly to companies, to the tune of \$30.5 billion each year.<sup>3</sup> And the cost impacts not only the bottom line of budgets but the ability of a team to produce at a high level and the morale of the company overall, as team members hesitate to invest in collegial relationships when their co-workers might be gone in a month.

Other managers are experiencing a disconcerting reticence when working with their teams; the familiar and even welcome complaints they were accustomed to (akin to Homer Simpson’s “everything’s okay” alarm) have been replaced with ambivalent acquiescence, seemingly coordinated absences, and even the occasional polite refusal of an assignment. Attempts at feedback are met with assurances that everything’s “fine,” but an uneasiness is growing that feels like the

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“quiet quitting” everyone’s talking about, particularly among younger workers.<sup>4</sup>

And then there’s remote work: what was once a perk or a practice reserved for multinational tech companies has become commonplace, and managers are struggling to increase employee engagement with a workforce they may only see in-person once a quarter—if they have ever met before. The advantage of proximity to forge relationships and create team dynamics is no longer a tool in the manager’s belt, limiting their ability to get the best work from their employees both individually and as a whole.<sup>5</sup>

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And many haven’t been given the tools for this new job.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.gallup.com/workplace/391922/employee-engagement-slump-continues.aspx>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.forbes.com/sites/jackkelly/2022/03/20/massive-microsoft-survey-of-31000-people-to-vibe-check-the-workplace-shows-a-mismatch-between-managers-and-employees/?sh=1ef16c511167>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.gallup.com/workplace/231587/millennials-job-hopping-generation.aspx#:~:text=Millennials%20have%20a%20reputation%20for,The%20data%20support%20this>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.gallup.com/workplace/398306/quiet-quitting-real.aspx>

<sup>5</sup> <https://hbr.org/2018/11/survey-remote-workers-are-more-disengaged-and-more-likely-to-quit>

## Old Problems, Old Tools

Many companies are reluctant to see this new era in employee engagement as permanent, opting instead to rely on traditional ways of incentivizing their workforce, namely compensation and recognition. But as we are observing with a growing tendency of employees to job hop, this binary approach to career satisfaction is problematic for companies in two ways:

1. It unwittingly creates an eventual problem by commoditizing specialized work in a competitive marketplace.
2. Today's employees are being satiated by a token economy of recognition.

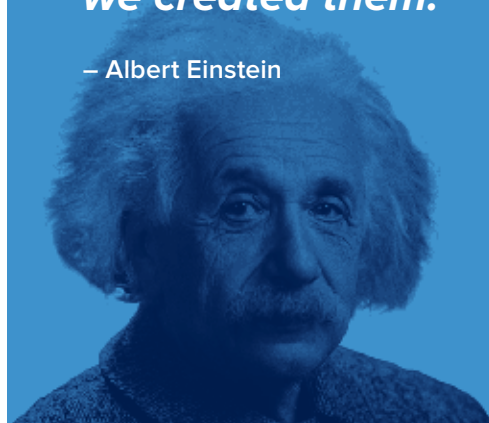
When compensation—salary, benefits, stock options, and other incentive programs—is the primary tool for employee engagement, a company is effectively commoditizing their positions, reducing their value to measurables and inviting competitors to play the same game. When a well-funded competitor offers better compensation, employees who have been conditioned to see the value of their job as primarily monetary are quick to consider leaving.

Whether or not many of us would like to admit it, humans remain social creatures, which makes recognition from management or peers an important lever in engaging employees. However, especially in a culture of career transience, decreased commitment to work, and remote offices, recognition efforts from companies can come off as gimmicky, a token economy that is more about behavior modification than it is about relationships.<sup>6</sup>

As Albert Einstein noted, “We cannot solve our problems with the same thinking we used when we created them.” Traditional employee engagement has created problems that require novel responses from managers; they need new ways to get the best from their teams, not more of the same.

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– Albert Einstein



## Five Ways to Rethink Employee Engagement

### I. Career satisfaction is an inside job

Career satisfaction has long been seen as an outside-in phenomenon that really included just two factors: competency and compensation. If you asked someone why they enjoyed their job, the answer would often consist of what they got to do every day and/or the lifestyle it afforded them. Even extending the ingredients of career satisfaction to include working conditions and collegial relationships, a trend emerges: these are all external factors.

And external factors are important. But they leave a company at the whim of a workforce, blindly predicting what will keep their employees happy or offering a curt “take it or leave it” approach to career satisfaction. Further, the current dynamic perpetuates an external locus of control for the workforce, leaving them helpless to improve their situation without a top-down initiative.

Instead, we assert that career satisfaction is an inside job, the product of empowered individuals with an internal locus of control, who take responsibility for their engagement and partner with management to find solutions.<sup>7</sup>

Unfortunately, the best tools that managers use to measure employee engagement often perpetuate an outside-in approach to career satisfaction, including powerhouses like Gallup's Q12 survey. As McKinsey Affiliate Advisor Aaron McHugh notes,

"Gallup's targeted inquiries drill into key questions like:

- "Does the mission /purpose of your company make you feel your job is important?"
- In the last seven days, have you received recognition or praise for doing good work?"
- In the last year, have you had opportunities to learn and grow?"

Good questions? On the surface, no doubt. We all want to be part of a mission we believe in, be applauded for doing great work, and develop personally and professionally. But there's a fatal flaw within Gallup's underlying assumption. We, you and I, are absolved from any personal responsibility, and 100 percent of the solution rests in the hands of our employers.

And this is where I'm calling BS. We need to take and remain in charge of stewarding our own happiness.<sup>8</sup>

## II. There's a Job-to-Be-Done (Theory)<sup>9</sup>

Many employees are a generation or two removed from an overly simplistic understanding of career satisfaction—valuing financial security above all else—and were taught to pursue certain jobs accordingly, creating a sense of obligation to leave their current position when presented with better compensation elsewhere. We suggest applying the Jobs-to-Be-Done Theory to career satisfaction to help employees recognize they likely want more from their careers than they realize.

We see this theory at play when comparing career satisfaction surveys among employees with the same job description and compensation; why are some engaged in their roles, some content, and others disengaged or even malcontents? Each employee is in effect "hiring" their job to fulfill a desired need in their lives. Therefore, the extent to which the job meets that need is in direct correlation to the career satisfaction that employee experiences, affecting those around them either positively or negatively.

When managers empower their employees by teaching them a nuanced approach to career satisfaction—namely, helping them understand what their specific Career Factors are—employees can name what they want from their career and employ a lens for discovering career satisfaction right where they are.

But what are employees looking for from their work if not a place to be compensated for what they can produce?

## III. Career satisfaction is more elegant than we realize

As alluded to previously, internally motivated career satisfaction is multifaceted; yes, being able to use your skills and talents (Strengths) while having the time and money to enjoy life (Lifestyle) is important, but we'd like to add four more: Impact, Relationships, Environment, and Growth. Keep in mind that some of these factors are more important to some than others, but all contribute to a comprehensive understanding of career satisfaction.

### Impact: My work matters.

Whether you're on an assembly line or at a brokerage house, the work you do makes a difference in a few ways, each a contributing factor to an individual's career satisfaction.

1. I have a passion for what I do at work.
2. The end product of my work affects others' lives.
3. My company's mission is aligned with my own.

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.gartner.com/en/newsroom/press-releases/2020-05-25-gartner-hr-research-shows-organizations-must-reinvent-their-employment-value-proposition-to-deliver-a-more-human-deal>

<sup>8</sup> Aaron McHugh, *Fire Your Boss! Discover Work You Love Without Quitting Your Job*, p. 22-23

<sup>9</sup> <https://strategyn.com/jobs-to-be-done/jobs-to-be-done-theory/>

**Relationships: Who I work with is important.**

As social creatures, we value belonging, and the desire to be part of a group can be a determinant of one's career satisfaction depending on internal drives.

1. I am a valuable contributor to my team.
2. My value goes beyond what I can produce.
3. I am a positive influence on others in the company.

**Environment: Where I work influences how I work.**

No Career Factor has become more obvious in the past three years than working environment, and research shows that when given the opportunity, many employees want a say in where they work<sup>10</sup> But Environment is more nuanced when employees share what they're looking for:

1. The pace of my workplace contributes to my best output.
2. I like the sense of control over my work space.
3. My physical location influences my ability to work well.

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**Growth: Opportunities to improve myself enhance my work.**

Emerging as a key contributor to career satisfaction in recent decades, Growth is an underrated area of focus for managers and employees alike, often coming to the fore after another factor has gone unmet. As with the others, the Growth component can show up in a variety of ways for a variety of workers.

1. I am a better person because of my job.
2. My company provides opportunities to improve my skills and learn new ones.
3. HR is invested in its employees.

Those familiar with the Gallup Q12 survey will find some common elements and even common terms, but addressing these as internally driven—not problems to be solved by someone else—allows companies to appreciate their employees more holistically and creates a common language for individuals to measure and own their career satisfaction. A more elegant understanding of what engages and retains each member of the workforce helps not only the manager but the staff themselves understand what they want from their work.

**IV. Employee engagement is not expensive**

In his famous 1890 speech “Acres of Diamonds,” Russell Conwell encouraged his listeners to put their shovel in the ground right where they stood because what they were looking for was at hand. We believe the same thing about improving employee engagement: whatever your workforce is looking for in their careers likely already exists in their current roles—or at least your company. What that means for managers is that they can begin engaging and retaining their current employees sooner than later and that the solution will likely not cost very much.

Managers often hesitate to ask for input or feedback when considering employee engagement programs for fear that budgetary restrictions will limit their ability to implement suggestions. However, a review of internally derived motivators like Relationships and Impact seldom require a heavy lift from management to fulfill. Even addressing Growth and Environment factors rarely involve costly professional development or capital improvements like open floor plans. Rather, engagement immediately improves when employees are included in efforts to improve career satisfaction factors that are meaningful to them and when lines of communication are authentic and remain open. Most people aren't looking for open floor plans and massage chairs in the breakroom; often, they want to feel heard, valued, and included.

When managers and their teams have a common language for engagement and retention, they solve problems more quickly and create opportunities for collaboration that were seemingly impossible in the past. Managers who embrace an intrinsically motivated approach to employee engagement find many solutions to existing problems solved in a short period of time and with little impact on their bottom line.

## **V. Employee engagement and retention is responsive, not reactive**

For many of today's workers, their understanding of and interaction with the Human Resources department is limited to beginning and ending their time with the company. At the same time, HR directors are often forced to operate under a "no news is good news" philosophy, aware of staff discontent only via a letter of resignation or an exit interview; HR directors simply do not have the time or resources to keep their finger on the pulse of everyone's career satisfaction in the company.

But we think they should. And we think they can.

Responsive employee engagement allows for

1. Regular assessment of career satisfaction for all staff
2. Integrating career satisfaction into evaluative assessment
3. Managers positioned as coaches
4. Staff to recognize changes in their own motivators over time

Responsive employee engagement creates a proactive HR department that can predict a company's hiring needs in advance and can attract the right candidates to fill vacant positions.

## **Conclusion**

At first glance, these suggestions can be seen as a sea change in how companies understand and approach employee engagement, retention, and hiring, especially given the challenges managers face in the "new normal" of a post-COVID working world. However, the present trends were only accelerated by the pandemic and are unlikely to revert in the future. What remains is an opportunity for managers to approach career satisfaction in a new way, one that will connect with employees more deeply and more effectively, creating an environment of collaboration that will produce dividends in the work each person does and the ownership they take over their own career satisfaction.

**It's time to empower our employees. Teaching them a new paradigm of career satisfaction can position managers as coaches who help employees discover what they want from their work and guides who help them find it.**

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