

Employee engagement: how business goals can be achieved through employee well-being

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*„...man is treated as an instrument of production, where as he – he alone, independently of the work he does – ought to be treated as the effective subject of work and its true maker and creator”
(John Paul II. 1981)*

The aim of this article is to provide an answer to a question – is it possible to have great business results and flourishing workforce at the same time? Many organizations are facing the dilemma of satisfying different stakeholders demands – shareholders expect increasing profits, society wants responsible business. These seem to be opposite goals, but as they say – opposites attract – especially when it comes to employee engagement.

Employee engagement is a state that has numerous beneficial outcomes for both the workforce and the employer. Engaged employees are passionate about their jobs, are fulfilling their potential and have enhanced well-being (satisfaction with life, health), feelings of purpose and meaning (Salanova et al 2010, Schaufeli et al 2008). Greater performance is possible without exploiting the workforce.

Review of engagement theory and practice in this presentation will let us see that the transfer from “scientific management” to Positive Organizational Scholarship is possible.

Keywords: employee engagement, well-being, satisfaction with life, performance, business results

1. Introduction

Many organizations are facing the dilemma of satisfying different stakeholders’ demands – shareholders expect increasing profits, the society wants responsible business. Growing global competition and socio-economic climate force organizations to „do more with less”. Increasing evidence of social, cultural and environmental costs of economic growth makes organizations adopt the view of the sustainable development – “meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (WCED 1987). Therefore it is important that managers focus on making their employees flourish rather than exploiting them. However for many managers the well-being of their employees and business results seem to be opposite goals, while for psychologist or HR specialist quite contradictory – how is it possible?

First of all, entrepreneurs try to achieve constantly increasing profit and some assumptions and rules that underlay scientific management theory may be compelling to them, hence they practice some of the ideas introduced in 1911 by Taylor (2003), like the need to:

- develop a science for each element of a man's work,
- select and then train, teach, and develop the workmen,
- cooperate with the men so as to insure all of the work being done in accordance with the principles of the science which has been developed,
- take over all work for which they are better fitted by management.

Most importantly – Taylor has highlighted the importance of paying for performance, which allows to control behavior and makes people strive for better results. Taking these elements into account, managers use performance management tools and measures which makes it possible to summarize all organizational behavior by fierce KPI – making the human factor redundant.

Unfortunately, what was most important to Taylor, has faded away. In the first chapter of his book in which he underlays the principles of scientific management, he states that “the principal object of management should be to secure the maximum prosperity for the employer, coupled with the maximum prosperity for each employee” (Taylor 2003, p. 9.). Further he explains that prosperity of employer means “development of every branch of the business to its highest state of excellence” and prosperity of employee: “development of each man to his state of maximum efficiency, so that he may be able to do, generally speaking, the highest grade of work for which his natural abilities fit him, and it further means giving him, when possible, this class of work to do”. Taylor also notices that although it would be natural to assume these ideas as leading objectives of management, the reality is different: these seem to be antagonistic perspectives. This observation remains true – as Easterlin (1996) noted – paradoxically the explosion of goods and services as well as rise of aspirations that came with industrial revolution made it even more difficult to experience well-being.

What can now be observed is the turn to the idea of sustainable development – the need that was foreseen by Taylor 100 years ago (Jaros 2005, WCED 1987).

This is also related with the fact that nowadays more and more psychological research is contributed to finding out how we can make it easier for people to experience well-being – and this is the main aim of positive psychology. Positive psychology shifts managers’ attention from negative states (like depression or stress) to positive states (engagement, feeling good). As Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000, p. 5.) noted, until now the research focused too much on pathology and repairing, instead of concentrating on building positive qualities and enhancing „fulfilled individual and thriving community”.

Summing up, from economists’ point of view for success in management the need is to focus on the economic indicators of profitability of an organization (i.e. high profits, cost reduction). Psychologists hold an opposite point of view that the indicator of business success is well-being of workers. What we know from previous research is that a) engagement is the one of the most important well-being indicators (Csikszentmihalyi 1990), b) employee engagement predicts employee turnover and customer loyalty (Harter et al 2002), c) psychological well-being of workers predicts, to some extent, their productivity (Donald et al 2005).

Hence, the aim of this paper is to discuss the necessity to focus on employee engagement in successful and profitable business management today.

In this paper we give a short review of the following: the concept of well-being, engagement as a component of well-being, reasons for increasing work/ employee engagement and next we move on to discuss the importance of employee engagement in business profitability.

2. Well-being through employee engagement

2.1. What is well-being?

Positive psychology and the study of well-being originally focused on happiness (subjective well-being) assuming that it was enough if positive emotions outweighed the negative ones

and people were satisfied with the key domains of life (Diener et al 1985). For example, Veenhoven (1996) indicated in his research that happiness is linked with the income level and GDP level. However, determining well-being only from hedonistic perspective is not enough, as Csikszentmihalyi (1999) asks in one of his articles – „If we are so rich, why aren't we happy?“. It was found out, that it is not the economic conditions themselves that make people happy (Howell–Howell 2008), but what they can do, the goals they have.

Currently, positive psychology research is shifting to eudaimonistic perspective – where happiness means experiencing the meaning of life or having a purpose in life. For example, self-determination theory (SDT), (Deci–Ryan 2000) presumes that if people are given a chance to fulfill their basic needs, such as: competence, relatedness and autonomy, they will experience well-being. In Kasser's aspiration model well-being is linked with pursuit of intrinsic goals in life like self-acceptance, affiliation, community feeling and physical health (Kasser–Ryan 1996). Another model of well-being – PERMA (Seligman 2011) includes five determinants of well-being: positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning and accomplishment/achievement. The research shows that well-being is provided by daily activities that allow one to satisfy one's basic needs (Reis et al 2010). As Diener and Seligman (2004) summarized, well being is conditioned by having resources to meet needs, having supportive friends and family, having rewarding and engaging work as well as adequate income, being healthy, having important goals related to one's values and having feelings of meaning.

2.2. Well-being at work: employee engagement link

As work is an everyday activity that on average fulfills about 77 000 hours of an adult person's life, and also can be viewed as a resource to satisfy other basic needs - it has substantial influence on well-being. As Warr (1987) suggested, certain factors of the work environment can be perceived as „vitamins“ that enhance well-being – these include for example: skill variety, clarity, physical security, autonomy and control, social support and interpersonal contact. Hence positive psychology research has also spread to work and organizational environment – researchers claim that organizational studies should focus on strengths and positive organizational behavior instead on pathology (Schaufeli–Bakker 2008).

Employee/work engagement is strongly associated with both psychological and physical indicators of thriving and that is why it can be perceived as work-related well-being seen from the eudaimonistic perspective (Schaufeli–Salanova 2010). Firstly, highly engaged employees have greater satisfaction with life (Wefald 2008, Szabowska-Walszczyk et al 2011a). A study by *Engagement Barometer* (2011)¹ for example shows that the most engaged employees can experience even 50% higher levels of subjective well-being than the least engaged ones. Also Rath and Harter (2010) show evidence that highly engaged employees are twice as likely to be thriving – high on well-being. Engagement has been also found to be associated with feelings of psychological meaningfulness (Van Zyl et al 2010).

Engagement is also associated with experiencing positive emotions more often, which according to “broaden and build” theory by Fredrickson (2001) allows people to perform better, as they become more out-going and effective. These findings can be also associated with flow – an autotelic experience, that occurs when activity is so enjoyable, it is worth doing just for itself (Csikszentmihalyi 1990).

¹ *Engagement Barometer* (Barometr Zaangażowania) – a consulting company providing employee engagement research and advisory services, located in Poland: <http://barometrzaangazowania.com>.

Another important engagement related outcome are self-efficacy beliefs (*Bandura* 1970) – person feels competent, able to achieve goals and accomplish success in what he or she is doing – which can be easily associated with fulfilling basic needs (*Salanova* et al 2010). Longitudinal studies conducted by *Hakanen* et al (2008), *Salanova* et al (2006) and *Xanthopoulou* et al (2009) prove the existence of a “spiral of positive gains” – an engaged employee makes better use of available personal and job resources and hence is more effective and receives positive feedback, which in turn enhances engagement.

Further well-being contribution is the positive relationship between employee engagement and greater self-reported health. Evidence supporting this thesis can be found in several studies: *Hakanen* et al (2006), *Schaufeli* et al (2008), *Schaufeli* et al (2006). More specifically, engaged employees report less headaches, cardiovascular problems or stomach aches (*Schaufeli–Bakker* 2004). *Agrawal–Harter* (2009) have also found that disengaged employees are twice as likely to be diagnosed depression, have higher stress levels and also have greater risk for heart disease.

Strong evidence supporting the existence of a positive relationship between engagement and well-being (both psychological and physical) as opposed to ill-being can be found in research regarding the difference between work engagement and workaholism. Although both seem similar work-related states when we consider such elements as: excessive hours worked or dedication to work, these states differ substantially. *Schaufeli* et al (2008) have shown that workaholics feel somewhat forced to work (drive) which results in lack of enjoyment of work and greater health problems, while engagement leads to better health and enthusiasm. Similarly in a study by *Schaufeli* et al (2006) high levels of engagement indicated greater satisfaction with life while workaholism quite the opposite.

3. How to increase employee engagement?

3.1. Capturing employee engagement

In the past decade employee engagement has gained attention of both: academia and practitioners. This is because engagement connotes: high levels of energy, being absorbed with tasks, innovativeness, dedication to goals etc. – and these qualities make it an interesting concept for consulting companies and academic researchers, as it is beneficial for organization and the employee.

The broadest perspective is “employee engagement” – which indicates the relationship between a person and performed work including the organizational context (*Schaufeli–Bakker* 2010). The assumption that engagement can be defined in an organizational context agrees with what *Macey* and *Schneider* (2008) have concluded in their meta-analytic review, as well as with the evidence concerning the importance of self-efficacy beliefs, which are associated with performance, that can be evaluated only when work environment is taken into account.

An example of this perspective is a definition introduced by *Engagement Barometer* (2011), see also *Szabowska-Walaszczyk* et al 2011b) that follows: employee engagement is a positive state that results in behavior beneficial for the employer, where positive state means: enjoying work and optimism towards tasks, giving the best of yourself and treating working for the organization as an important part of life. More specifically these elements connote being engrossed with one’s work cognitively, physically and emotionally as the person: likes performed work, uses full potential as in an autotelic experience (i.e. flow); enjoys intense work and is energetic, feels as if the time flew by; feels the work is meaningful and relates oneself to the success of the organization as a whole. Employee engagement is both: job and

organizational engagement (*Saks* 2006). What follows engagement are specific behaviors and attitudes (loyalty), that accumulated in time and number lead to business related outcomes.

Some researchers focus only on work engagement itself, for example *Schaufeli* and *Bakker* (2004) define it as a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind that is characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption. However *Bakker* and *Demerouti* (2008) also suggest that work engagement research is a part of positive organizational behavior (POB) paradigm, defined as “study and application of positively oriented human resource strengths and psychological capacities that can be measured, developed, and effectively managed for performance improvement in today’s workplace” (*Luthans* 2002, p. 59.), that also relates to the organizational context, hence the term work and employee engagement are used interchangeably in this article.

What is common for either of perspectives is that engagement is perceived as a positive work-related state that:

- is characterised by enjoyment of work, high levels of energy, as well as cognitive and emotional dedication to work,
- is relatively stable across time,
- is measurable and is influenced by performed work and work environment (functioning of an organization and co-workers),
- has positive results for the person itself and the employer.

3.2. Drivers of engagement

Other important issue is the necessity to differentiate engagement from its antecedents (drivers) and direct or indirect results, which allows it to be measurable – this was noted by *Saks* (2006), *Macey* and *Schneider* (2008) and *Szabowska-Walaszczyk* (2010). *Macey* and *Schneider* (2008) specifically refer to “engagement scales” that in fact measure drivers of engagement or focus mostly on results, such as particular behaviour. Such an approach makes it impossible to measure engagement itself, not to mention suggesting what can be done to enhance it.

What is also crucial, is the fact that employee engagement is a state distinguishable from other positive work related states such as job satisfaction or organizational commitment (*Macey* and *Schneider* 2008). The main difference is that engagement consist of energy-activation component and satisfaction is more a satiation-like state that connotes contentment with conditions of work, furthermore organizational commitment is a binding force between a person and the employer, and doesn’t have to include the relationship with ones work (*Schaufeli–Bakker* 2010). It should also be noted that commitment, especially if defined as in three component model by *Meyer* and *Allen* (1991): with affective, continuance and normative commitment, doesn’t necessarily have positive connotation as it can be a “binding force” not enjoyment of work (*Bańka* et al 2002). Also studies by *Hallberg* and *Schaufeli* (2006) have provided empirical evidence that work engagement cannot be equalled with either organizational commitment or job involvement.

If engagement is defined as a distinct and unique state it can be measured and managed through enhancing the qualities of work and organizational environment that drive engagement - “job resources” (*Bakker* 2011). In the academic literature following antecedents of employee/work engagement have been found: social support from colleagues and supervisors, performance feedback, skill variety, autonomy, and learning opportunities (*Bakker–Demerouti* 2007), information and innovative climate (*Hakanen* et al 2006), rewards

and recognition (*Koyuncu et al 2006*), work-life balance (*Sonnetag 2003*), procedural justice and job characteristics (*Saks 2006*). At the same time lack of job resources and presence of job demands – difficult conditions could evoke burn-out – through excessive workload, emotional demands, time pressure, difficult physical conditions (*Bakker 2011*).

One of the most important elements is the leadership style or the quality of management that is presented by the immediate manager. Wefald has proved that what fosters high levels of engagement is transformational leadership (*Wefald 2008*), this relationship was also confirmed by *Zhu et al (2008)* – with correlation reaching $r=0,58$ ($p<0,01$). Similarly *Szabowska-Walaszczyk and Zawadzka (2011)* have studied this mechanism more carefully – it seems that when employees rate their supervisor lower as far as the quality of management is concerned, they also perceive their organization as functioning worse. This concerns especially such dimensions as: internal communication, change management, empowerment and participation, opportunity to learn and use skills, employment policy. Furthermore, this was related to lower levels of engagement and more limited scope of positive organizational behaviors.

Research also shows that that some personal characteristics (“personal resources”) such as: self-efficacy, organization-based self-esteem, optimism, locus of control are positively related to engagement, or can even be treated as its predictors (*Albrecht 2010*). Employees possessing these qualities are more likely to approach more demanding goals, even in presence of job demands and make better use of available resources (*Salanova et al 2010*).

4. Employee engagement and business results

The link between employee engagement and positive business results has been confirmed in several studies – for overview see *MacLeod and Clarke (2009)*, *Bakker (2011)*. As *Arnold Bakker (2011)* has summarized, four reasons can be found why engaged employees perform better:

- positive emotions caused by engagement allow greater thought-action repertoire,
- better health means that all resources and skills can be dedicated to work,
- feelings of self-efficacy allow creation and better use of job and personal resources,
- high levels of engagement of one person positively influences whole teams and evokes greater collaborative effort.

What is most important engagement leads to “going an extra mile”, which in literature is defined by concepts such as: discretionary effort, extra-role behavior or organizational citizenship behavior (*Macey–Schneider 2008*, *Xanthopoulou et al 2009*). More specifically engagement is connoted with pursuit of better performance, persistence in achievement of goals, seeking innovative methods of work, praising the company (products and as employer), being loyal and working more as well as more intensively – see *Szabowska-Walaszczyk et al (2011b)* for details. These behaviors lead to business results such as: enhanced quality of external and internal customer service, effective key organizational processes, lessened absence, decreased fluctuation, greater productivity and improved financial results (see Table 1).

Table 1. How employee engagement drives success

DRIVERS OF ENGAGEMENT	EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT	EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT	EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT
Key areas: 1. Performed work 2. Immediate manager 3. Rewards and recognition 4. Practices and climate 5. Development and knowledge 6. Perception of the Leaders and employment politics	Positive state that results in behavior beneficial for the employer	1. Pursuit of better performance 2. Persistence in achievement of goals 3. Seeking innovative methods of work 4. Praising the company 5. Being loyal 6. Working more 7. Working more intensively	1. Enhanced quality of external customer service 2. Enhanced quality of internal customer service 3. Effective key processes 4. Lessened absence 5. Decreased fluctuation 6. Greater productivity 7. Improved financial results

Source: Engagement Barometer (2011)

For example a diary study conducted by *Xanthopoulou et al (2009)* on employees from several fast-food restaurants has shown that daily levels of employee engagement were significant predictors of financial returns. An important factor that influenced engagement was supportive behavior of the manager, that had coached the employee. In another diary study (*Xanthopoulou et al 2008*) the level of engagement had positive influence on extra-role (helping company overall image, helping coworkers) and in-role performance (fulfilling job requirements and objectives).

Similarly *Salanova et al (2005)* has analyzed the influence of work engagement among customer service employees: sample consisted of over hundred units: 58 hotel receptions and 56 restaurants. The results show that employees that had resources such as: autonomy, training and technology (tools) had greater levels of engagement and this had positive influence on service climate. As a result customers perceived these front-desk employees as providing great service (high levels of performance): putting themselves into customer's place, doing more than usual and surprising them with excellent quality, being empathic towards needs – all that has positively influenced levels of customer loyalty. Engagement level was also proved to have positive influence on unit innovativeness as was shown in a study by *Hakanen et al (2008)*.

Apart from maximizing profits and performance, organizations try to minimize fluctuation as hiring new employees is costly: team performance is temporarily decreased and very often so valuable “know-how” is lost. Research shows that high engagement means loyalty and associating ones future with current employer – negative correlation between engagement and intention to quit is rather strong, for example $r=-0,475$, $p<0,01$ (*Wefald 2008*). Similarly *Saks (2006)* has shown that high engagement significantly lessened intentions to quit – standardized β coefficients in multiple regression analyses equaled $\beta=0,33$ ($p<0,01$).

As mentioned before employee engagement also correlates with better health – from organizational perspective this is an important outcome that can help decrease absence and costs of sicknesses – highly engaged employees are reported to take even up to 2,5 times less sick days than those low on engagement (*Engagement Barometer 2011*). Similar results were reported by *Schaufeli et al (2009)* – engagement was negatively correlated with voluntary absence (frequency of taking days off), and burn out (as a state of ill-being) predicted the duration of absence.

Several studies have also been done by the Gallup Organization in order to provide evidence of positive relationship between employee engagement and business outcomes. As *Harter et al (2003)* state, the correlation between engagement and performance is between $r=0,26$ (within companies) and $r=0,33$ (across companies). When standard deviations of performance are taken into account, the dependence is such, that business units with employee engagement level above the median achieve results 0,5 above standard deviation of accepted performance units. A meta-analytic review involving 8000 business units (*Harter et al 2002*) has shown that when comparing high and low engagement teams, following average differences can be found: 10%-29% less turnover, 1,9%-4,4% greater customer satisfaction, 80 000-120.000 \$ higher revenue (sale) per month. Additionally, *Rath and Harter (2010)*, state that the annual cost of lost productivity due to sick days can differ substantially depending on employee well-being: for those who are low on well-being estimated cost reaches \$28 800, while for people high on well-being – \$840. In other words, these researchers have found a significant relationship between employee well-being (understood as work engagement) and customer satisfaction, business productivity and profitability.

5. Conclusions

Joseph Stiglits, the Nobel prize winner in economy, said, “What you measure affects what you do. If you don’t measure the right thing, you don’t do the right thing” (*Goodman 2009*). All studies reviewed above show that employee engagement, resulting from well-being at workplace, can have a substantial influence on the competitive advantage of companies, which proves, in turn, that the approach of sustainable growth has extensive grounds. Organizations have to change their views on how to lead successful business nowadays. It is time to shift from focus on primacy of capital and profit increase to focus on components of well-being in organization – on work/employee engagement. The engagement theorists, *Schufeli and Salanova (2010)*, suggest that enhancement of engagement is a very important issue that should receive constant attention from managers. Hence, they suggest that the term “amplition” should be used for management of engagement, meaning continuous improvement of work and work environment quality, instead of interventions.

There are some additional arguments indicating the necessity to shift from money/capital increase to engagement/ human account. There is a great amount of research on the negative effects of focusing on money. When people focus on money they are more competitive, greedy and antisocial (*Vohs et al 2008*) which could influence negatively team work and organizational climate. We also have to be aware of growing consumer force on business management – consumers want to make sure that organizations have “a human face”, that is related with Corporate Social Responsibility politics introduced more and more often worldwide. There are some well-known cases of business problems in which workers suffered from ill-being (bad work conditions, breaking human rights, *Klein 2004, Zawadzka 2010*) which resulted in consumer boycott of their products.

Summing up, in the XXI century when the world economy should follow the idea of sustainable development and successful business needs to have “a human face” to develop and exist. We have to reconsider again the *Maslow (1968)* idea that humanitarian and wise management policy focus on social capital can return in profit. It is rightful to state that a paradigm of “economics of well-being” (*Rath–Harter 2010*) or “economy of well-being” (*Diener–Seligman 2004*) should be considered as a focal point of strategy planning and research.

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