Making employee engagement an end-to-end practice

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Abstract
Purpose – This paper aims to assist businesses of all sizes in employee engagement, attraction and retention, by demonstrating how fundamental human resources (HR) processes can be effectively combined with new technologies to make employee engagement an end-to-end practice. Employers know that happy and fulfilled employees are more productive, but attracting and retaining the best talent for a business involves engaging employees in the long term. This paper discusses a range of tactics to help ensure engagement, such as regular appraisals, use of social networking and the efficient recording of employee performance and interests, to best optimize the talent management process.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper takes a practical approach. It is based on both Richard Doherty’s extensive experience in the HR and talent management sector, as well as the practical experiences Jobpartners has had through working with its clients for over a decade. It looks at the basic values of interaction with employees, as well as how best to optimize, streamline and efficiently operate all aspects of employee engagement in order to lead to a more productive workforce with lower churn.

Findings – This paper demonstrates how best to engage employees from before a career even begins, right up until it ends. It offers guidance on using the latest techniques and technology to keep employees engaged and motivated. Threading through the paper is the knowledge that even if an employee moves to another company, you may still hold a relationship with them as partners or customers. Employee engagement must therefore be an end-to-end practice and this paper will help show how to make that a reality.

Originality/value – Motivated and efficient workforces only happen when respect flows in all directions through a business, with transparent processes throughout. This article looks at examples of how the mobile network operator “3” and Rabobank used some of the tactics referred to above to reap benefits such as reducing recruitment costs and meeting targets for employee assessments. This information results from Jobpartners ongoing work with both companies to help them streamline and integrate their HR processes.

Keywords Performance appraisal, Computer software, Human resource management, Employee attitudes

Paper type Case study

Employee engagement is one of those often talked about but rarely understood concepts. Every employer knows that a happy and fulfilled employee is a more productive one, but to attract and retain the best talent for a business involves engaging employees in the long term. Engagement is about respect going both up, down and across a business, transparency throughout and alignment of HR and management policies to business culture and objectives. When all this is done well, employees will be doing the right job for all the right reasons, and the business benefits will be tangible.

This article discusses how best to encourage employee engagement from before a career even begins, right until it ends, including how to combine the latest techniques and technology with fundamental HR processes to keep employees engaged and motivated. The key thing to remember is that even if an employee in whom a business has invested chooses to move on to another company, they might still remain important in their next role as
a partner or customer. Employee engagement must truly, therefore, be an end-to-end practice for your business.

Why should I care?

One of the most obvious business benefits of engaging employees includes a reduction in employee turnover. This instantly reduces costs associated with recruitment and training, but also encourages stability. That in itself will deliver its own benefits within a team, in terms of spreading feelings of engagement and team loyalty and values. In addition to internal engagement levels with other employees, this stability is also positive in terms of customer and partner relations. An engaged employee will be better able to establish a good working rapport and sell the benefits of their company or what it offers, therefore having a positive impact on the bottom line. A further benefit lies with the business brand; the lower the attrition rate and the longer the standard employee tenure with a company, the better its reputation as a place to work and so the more likely it is that such a business will attract the strongest talent. Furthermore, potential customers, particularly in service industries, will often ask for information on staff turnover and so an engaged workforce really does pay dividends.

Become engaged before you have even met

So, what are the best ways to make sure your business can benefit from engagement? The starting point should in fact begin with the recruitment process, before you have even met the potential employee that you will be hoping to engage in the future. Effective employer branding is absolutely vital in order for the best quality candidates to apply for jobs within a company. A strong business brand that is consistently attractive to job-hunters is fundamental to enticing candidates to look at your careers web site and apply for roles. Consequently, HR departments must engage with marketing and communications departments in order to present an integrated strategy.

This integration is particularly important during the actual recruitment process. One way in which to attract the strongest candidates is to have a strong and consistently branded online recruitment process, which has the appropriate level of presence online, and to have a presence on social networking sites, in particular, as befits your business and the role being advertised. A well-run online process will give the candidates a feel of what they want from a business they would like to work for, and all the information they need to engage them right from the start. As part of this initial engagement it is crucial to respond to candidates quickly and with useful feedback. For businesses, ensuring a well-integrated and smooth online recruitment process, as part of ongoing candidate management, is also important for ongoing talent management. For example, records can be kept of those candidates who might not be suitable for the current role on offer, but who could be revisited as and when a better role for them arises.

Being able to attract the best talent is essential for all organizations, so it is advantageous to be able to identify it as early as possible. One tool that can be used is psychometric testing, which can help to identify those candidates with the traits that you want (and those that you don’t), while adding a layer of objectivity to the recruitment process. This can help your HR teams to better target their questions to candidates in further interviews, and help them to understand early on where people's strengths and weaknesses lie.

Investing in candidate engagement – what 3 did

One company that invested in candidate engagement is the UK mobile network, 3. 3 decided to move all its recruitment online, because it wanted to ensure that candidates would have a consistent and positive experience of the company. In doing this, 3 hoped to make the process not only easier and more transparent for the candidates, but also more efficient for managers, as they were able to better cope with large volumes of applications and interviews.
Historically, 3 had used an admin-heavy combination of Microsoft Excel spreadsheets and Outlook to manage its recruitment campaigns. This process was inconsistent, with an ad hoc reporting system. In 2002, 3 worked to put in place a solution with five different online recruitment gateways, each aimed at recruiting for different parts of the business (for example, one for retail stores and another for contact center and HQ functions). These gateways are split between internal and external recruitment and demonstrate complete integration throughout. Simultaneously, 3 redesigned its careers website in order to make it as simple as possible to apply for a job, cutting the length of time needed to apply online from 30 minutes to ten minutes. In 2006, 3 revisited its processes in order to ensure that it was working with the best solution possible, and could work towards maintaining standards in the future.

The ability to contact candidates promptly and professionally is a differentiator for 3 in a highly competitive market, helping it to attract and engage top talent. It also improves the employer brand through offering candidates the ability to track their application status at every stage of the process. The software solution that 3 implemented has allowed the HR team to save valuable time by simultaneously posting jobs to multiple channels, including job-boards, the corporate web site, universities and recruitment agencies. As a result, 3 has significantly lowered its reliance on external recruitment agencies, saving on average £1,760 per hire as a result.

Starting out on engagement and appraising at each stage

Once talented candidates have been identified and successfully hired to join the business, the engagement process begins in earnest. Adding to the records started over the recruitment process, personnel files can be built up to help businesses truly understand where the talent and assets lie in a business. Well-kept records help to understand where strengths and weaknesses of an individual lie, so helping to inform training, management and internal mobility and succession planning strategies. Without identifying the characteristics of employees, it can prove very difficult for businesses to truly engage their workforce.

Employees need to feel that they are being listened to and valued. As such, businesses should hold regular appraisals with employees, and demonstrate that communication channels are well established and always open. A coordinated performance management process should not be treated as an administrative burden, but instead a way to gauge the opinions and feelings of employees and offer valuable feedback to them about how their work is going and areas of strength and potential improvement. All businesses need visibility of their employees’ performance, be that on a single-office or global scale, as such insights can help with the identification of skills gaps and succession planning.

Performance management processes are critical within many organizations in defining and working towards overall business objectives, increasing transparency and keeping everyone focused on the business goals. Such interaction can also mean any potential employee problems can be identified early and dealt with efficiently. The more employees feel that they are valued and see that their employers are helping them work towards their personal career goals, the more loyal to and engaged with a business they will be.

“Engagement is about respect going both up, down and across a business.”
Investing in appraising its employees – Rabobank International

Rabobank International is the international operation of the Rabobank Group, a financial services provider. With over 340 offices in over 40 countries worldwide and after experiencing rapid growth, Rabobank was finding it very difficult to consistently manage the performance of its employees to the same standard globally. Each region had its own appraisal processes using a different number of forms and tools, and HR departments were facing a big administrative burden trying to chase managers for appraisal feedback.

To overcome the inefficiencies and inconsistencies of the appraisals program, Rabobank needed a solution that would allow employees and managers alike to keep a record of their achievements, ongoing development initiatives and objectives. In 2005, the bank chose to implement a single system that could be used across the business to support its global performance initiative. The solution took advantage of the latest workflow-based technologies in order to establish an efficient, effective and paperless process.

The entire employee appraisal process is now managed online, vastly reducing the amount of time HR spends paper chasing, as automated reminders, status reports and process escalation all help to drive task efficiency and completion in line with company objectives. Another benefit that Rabobank saw from this customizable solution was an improved relationship between manager and employee, as the latter was given an efficient tool with which to structure their performance related discussions.

As a result of the solution implementation, not only was Rabobank able to ensure all regions were compliant with its appraisals processes, but it was able to achieve its performance management goals of increasing global transparency and appraisal completion rates. Performance management across the entire business now sees over 90 percent of staff consistently completing objective setting and appraisals by set deadlines, compared with the confusing and inconsistent system in place previously whereby each region had its own appraisals processes. The information gathered can also track year-on-year trends, thus enabling the organization to save more time by combining performance management ratings with staff turnover, giving the bank the ability to measure global retention rates. These offer guidance as to whether the best talent is being retained and, if it’s not, the issues raised can be addressed.

Networking throughout the engagement

In addition to holding regular appraisals with employees, there are other ways in which to engage the workforce and listen to their opinions and ideas. One of the best methods is to take advantage of the technology available to us, including tools that many organizations currently block their employees from accessing – social networks. By creating an internal social network and replicating experiences available on the internet on a company intranet, businesses will find that they are providing employees with a place in which colleagues can share knowledge, interests and experience right across the company.

Internal networks can help to engage employees in many ways, not least in just feeling part of a workforce community. Having buy-in from senior executives can also make employees feel that they are valued and that their voices are heard right at the top of the company. In the same vein, an internal network is an excellent way to pass messages along to all members of staff and open issues for comment so that organized business-wide conversations and interaction can take place.

When employees can engage with each other, have profiles where they can outline their interests and have informal online chats, this provides yet another mechanism for HR departments to understand where people’s strengths, interests and aspirations lie. If, for example, a colleague in the USA is looking for an expert on a particular area, consulting the internal network can be an efficient way to make the most of your workforce’s talents and make sure people get to work on projects they find interesting and where they have the skills...
to add value. This will keep them more engaged with the business as a whole and serve great purpose in employee satisfaction, productivity and loyalty.

At times when business is not going so well, as has been experienced by many of us over the last year or so, the use of internal networks in conjunction with performance management systems helps not only to keep employees up to speed with the company situation, but also helps inform decisions about redeployment of employees and education. Often, redeployment is seen as a negative step by employees, but actually, when it is done properly and managed carefully, it is positive for both the business and the employee in question. Using all the information from regular appraisals and internal networking sites, employers can ensure that they redeploy people with the relevant strengths and interests to the places that will most benefit them.

Rewarding your workforce

While keeping a workforce happy with well-matched work, excellent career prospects and a loyalty to your company brand, another way to engage them is through reward schemes. The recession has encouraged much negative press around bonuses and incentive schemes, but this should lead to a valuable increase in transparency between performance and rewards. The first step should be to implement a well-recorded and consistent performance management scheme, so that rewards can be clearly linked to performance. Such linked incentive schemes can enhance employee productivity and engagement, as well as help encourage loyalty from the workforce, as they feel that good work really does pay off.

There is a risk that for some members of staff there will be envy of those who publicly win incentive-based rewards, and this is just one reason why it is so important to have a recorded and transparent system that allows your business to set standards and targets that can guide rewards. Depending on your size and area of business, this will also be vital in order to avoid any negative press for undeserved bonuses or bad business ethics.

Ensuring you do not have a divorce of opinions

The lifecycle of an employee is a long one, and the task of engaging them with your business should not end when they walk out of the door. Companies can benefit from carrying out exit interviews to gather honest feedback about feelings towards the company and areas for improvement. Ex-employees may go on to work for a potential partner or customer, or even just be asked for advice from a friend. As such the end of an employee’s formal relationship with a business should be seen as the beginning of a process of keeping them loyal to the brand, going full circle to the original brand awareness tactics used to get them applying for a role with you in the first place. This could include creating groups on social networking sites such as Linked In and Facebook, or the regular arrangement of alumni events by your business.

Engagement is vital from start to finish, and done properly, systematically and in an integrated way, your business will thrive. Done badly, you will not only find your business spends unnecessary amounts of money on recruitment and training, but you will also find that essential talent will not be drawn to your company in the first place. Follow this route to its logical conclusion and your business will suffer through bad working relationships with customers and partners, resulting in lost revenues.
But this need not be the case. If businesses listen, and think about making it as easy as possible for employees – from the candidate stage to the alumnus stage – to work with them and get what they want and need, they will engage them and breed loyalty. By using technology to help regulate and integrate HR and management systems with other parts of the business and putting the focus back on the people rather than the process, you might find yourself attracting and retaining all the best talent and saving yourself money at the same time.

About the author

Richard Doherty joined Jobpartners in August 2000 and is Group Vice President of Solutions and Marketing. He was previously VP operations UK/US and professional service director. Doherty’s current responsibilities include managing the solution consulting teams and the design of talent management solutions for potential clients. Prior to joining Jobpartners, he was at the SAS Institute, where he had responsibility for product strategy development, support services and technical consulting. Previous to that, he gained extensive experience in managing teams to provide training, implementation services, consultancy and technical support with Safeway Stores plc. Richard Doherty can be contacted at: richard.doherty@jobpartners.com