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Employee Fulfillment: The Future of Workplace Culture

Employee engagement is dead.

By definition, engaged employees are "involved in, enthusiastic about, and committed to their work and workplace." Studies have shown that high levels of employee engagement can correlate with employee retention – but that was in a pre-pandemic work world.

Before the pandemic began, many workers were face-to-face with their bosses and coworkers every day. Yet when states issued shelter-in-place orders in March of 2020, those who were able were sent home to work.

This posed an obvious problem for leaders: how do I keep my teams engaged when I only see them on my computer screen? Many resorted to virtual happy hours, an increased number of meetings, and new tech to seamlessly communicate with remote workers. Overcompensating by communicating more frequently was the only thing people knew to do in the beginning. Unfortunately, most found that these "solutions" didn't actually solve anything, and people began to disengage as they felt increasingly isolated.

In the midst of this upheaval, Jonathan Caballero, a software developer based in Maryland, realized his life was passing him by too quickly. It's a thought many had as they watched their loved ones succumb to the virus: life is short and we have limited time to do the things we love.

This realization inspired Caballero, 27, to quit his job once his employer called people back to the office. With how much time he spent driving to and from work, Caballero knew there were more important things he'd rather be doing during that 90-minute round-trip commute.

Speaking to NPR, Caballero said, "I think the pandemic has changed my mindset in a way; like I really value my time now."

Even though we hit a (very short) recession hard and fast in the early days of the pandemic, the national turnover rate climbed as the economy began to recover. Over 47 million Americans voluntarily left their jobs in 2021, yet unemployment remains low, meaning they aren't leaving the workforce. Job seekers have plenty of options when it comes to choosing a new role. The market is skewed heavily in favor of the worker. This has left many wondering, "where have all the workers gone?" or, better yet, lamenting that "no one wants to work anymore."

People do want to work; they just want fair wages, inspirational and empathetic leadership, and a strong purpose to which they can connect. Now, more than ever, people are seeking to find deeper meaning in their lives, and one of the first aspects they are re-evaluating is their jobs. The Great Resignation (or Great Reshuffle, as some have called it) proves this. They want to find value in the work they do.

We live in a capitalistic society, which means that nearly all of us must hold a job in order to survive. We historically have been judged as humans by our output: how many hours we work, how much money we make, and how productive we are. In fact, the term "productive member of society" is usually attached to someone's vocation.

All of these factors make up a structure where many employees feel, at best, ambivalent about the work they do; according to one recent survey, 50 percent of respondents indicated that they dislike their jobs. Since we spend over a third of our lives at work, this means many people are spending a large portion of their lives feeling unhappy.

What started out as a thread on Reddit has now turned into a movement: antiwork. Employees are growing increasingly tired of helping large corporations with forgotten values make money off their precious time. In this popular forum, users post memes and articles, but they also post stories of abusive workplaces and bosses to support the notion that we should end work. While it's a nice utopian vision, it's not reality. What people are really after is purpose; they just see work as a barrier to finding and fulfilling their purpose.

So what if leaders of organizations big or small, private or public, non-profit or for-profit, removed that barrier and chose not to focus on engagement (an outdated and incomplete snapshot of an employee's life at work)? Engagement is all about productivity and doesn't address happiness, mental health, meaning, or purpose. Let's put it to rest and let something much more important take its place: employee fulfillment.

Employee Engagement Falls Short

When organizations suffer from high turnover, low productivity, and poor financial performance, they turn first to three things: processes, technology, and, most importantly, their people (read: culture). They have more meetings, force increased communication, and, in some cases, crack down on how employees spend their time using monitoring tools.

Since human behavior can be hard to measure and change, many leaders assume that the only way to determine whether or not their people are effective is through an engagement survey. CEOs look to HR leaders to give them hard numbers on the overall happiness of their people. And for an HR leader, the best tool to quantify happiness is an engagement survey.

The history of the engagement survey is long and complex – and originally began as an "attitude survey" – primarily a measurement of job satisfaction. In the 1990s, however, Professor William Kahn of Boston University coined the term "employee engagement" as a way to measure overall job satisfaction in a way that tied directly to financial outcomes.

As a result, satisfaction surveys died and management consultants pushed engagement: arguing it was more directly tied to productivity. Frustrated CEOs were thrilled to measure not just satisfaction, but production.

The numbers to support the efficacy of employee engagement seem compelling, but they don't tell the whole story.

→ **Higher engagement rates are linked to 21% higher profitability**

→ **Low engagement rates cost companies over $400B annually due to poor productivity**

→ **48% fewer safety incidents occur in workplaces with highly engaged employees**

More and more organizations are focusing on raising wages and creating "cool" cultures in an effort to engage current employees while also attracting new talent. In spite of this, engagement rates are trending down: as of early 2022, only 32 percent of surveyed employees feel engaged, while 17 percent are actively disengaged, compared to 2020, when numbers came in at 36 percent and 14 percent, respectively. Additionally, high engagement rates in your organization don't always predict retention; conversely, they don't always prevent attrition.

The Problems with Employee Engagement Surveys

Employee engagement surveys don't even begin to measure what gives people meaning. Instead, typical engagement surveys measure things like clarity, development, and whether or not the employee would recommend their workplace to a friend. HR leaders measure these subjects because they are able to focus on correcting them and then continue to evaluate them year-over-year in order to prove their own efficacy. There are several problems, though:

- These surveys only measure a moment in time. An employee could fill out the survey on a bad day and score low.
- They might also score high and still quit their job.
- They're often far too long and people lose patience.
- The surveys are also done too infrequently.
- Many respondents don't trust them to be completely anonymous.

But most importantly, engagement surveys *don't measure fulfillment*.

These are questions taken directly from an engagement survey:

How clear are you on your assigned duties?

1 |—+—+—+—+—+—+—| 10

On a scale of 1-10, how satisfied are you with your opportunities for development?

1 |—+—+—+—+—+—+—| 10
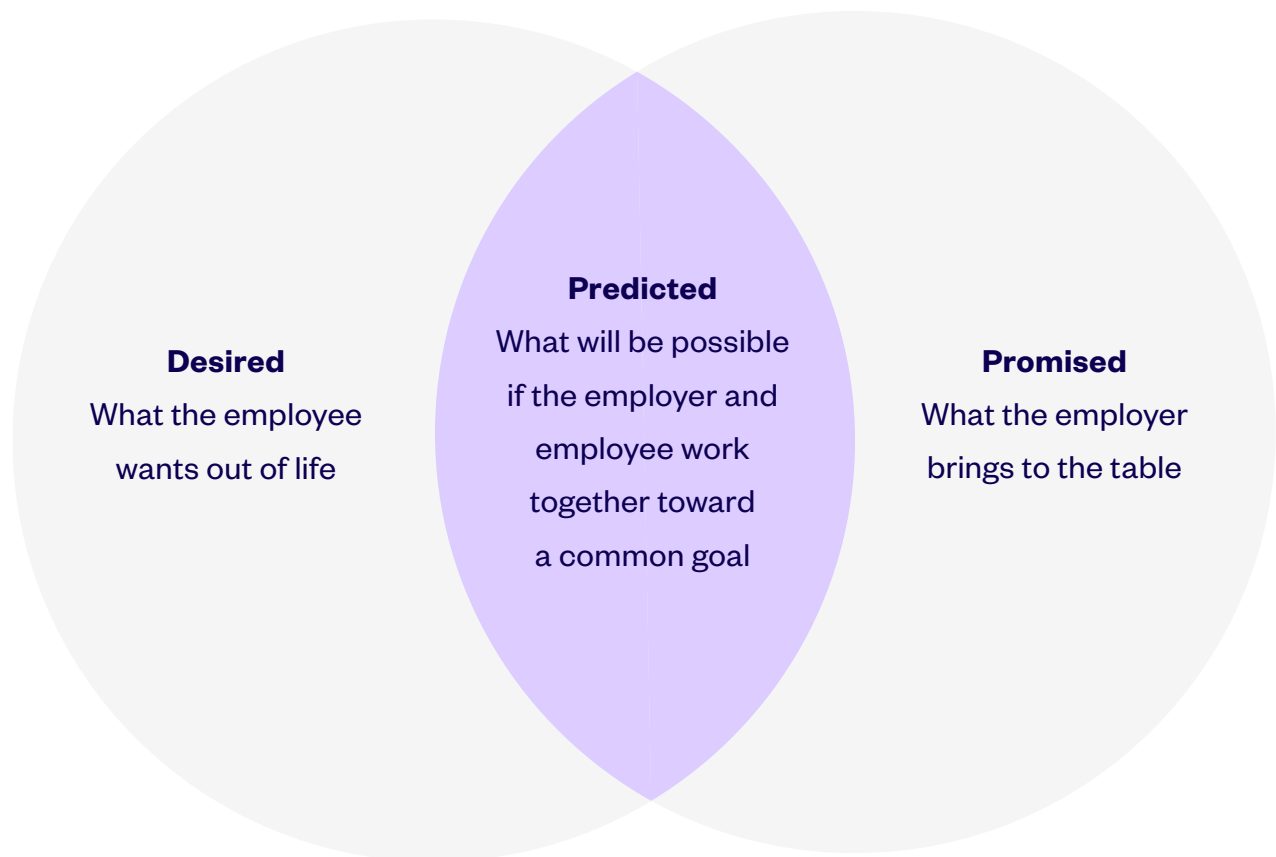
How satisfied are you with your compensation?

1 |—+—+—+—+—+—+—| 10

This is where engagement misses the mark: it only helps leaders understand *how* certain processes or teams are working, not *why*. It doesn't ask if the employees connect to the organization's **purpose** — its reason for existing — nor does it measure how connected employees are to their own purposes. When we feel connected to purpose, we feel motivated to fulfill it. This is why leaders need to shift the way they view and gauge the health of their culture: workers are looking to feel fulfilled, not just engaged.

The New Employee Engagement: Employee Fulfillment

Fulfillment is defined as "achieving something desired, promised, or predicted." **This is where we find meaning.**

When applied to our work:

Desired
What the employee
wants out of life

Predicted
What will be possible
if the employer and
employee work
together toward
a common goal

Promised
What the employer
brings to the table

"To live a fulfilled life we need to find our purpose and go with it."

— John Strelecky,
  Author, *The Why Café*

According to the late Chris Argyris, famed Harvard professor and business theorist, for all workers there is an invisible psychological employer/ employee social contract – the unspoken agreement between worker and employer.

In this, the employer is required to provide wages, job security and opportunities for growth. In return, employees will respect the right of the organization to evolve.

Unfortunately, this contract has eroded over time as we have hit periods of recession, when employers have furloughed or laid off employees to stay afloat. This reduction in job security has led to an erosion of trust and the newfound understanding that jobs are no longer for life, and an employee's loyalty should likewise no longer be taken for granted.

HR departments across corporate America have attempted to secure this loyalty by implementing a number of initiatives that don't often take off: employee well-being, authenticity, mindfulness, and other ideas that make many people inwardly cringe.

They encourage employees to use the "resources" they provide, such as three free therapy sessions (usually aggregate, not annual), free subscriptions to meditation apps, and wellness retreats, all with the pressure to still get work done or face consequences.

All of these efforts miss the mark, though, since they are only band-aids used to cover a deeper issue.

Employee fulfillment has come to the forefront in recent years as several shifts have happened:

→ Today's worker has **different expectations** than yesterday's worker

→ People are **burned out** from working jobs they aren't passionate about

→ Employee retention is no longer driven primarily by **offering higher pay**

→ Workers are **increasingly seeking opportunities** for professional growth

Many think this push for fulfillment is driven by the younger generations in the workforce. However, millennials and Gen Z aren't the only ones who care about fulfillment; people of all ages and from all backgrounds want to find purpose and meaning in life, and in their work. And even if our work doesn't connect to our purpose in life, we can still find meaning in it.

Maybe a server at a large chain restaurant doesn't feel like their company's purpose is their purpose in life, but a successful organization can help that server connect to the company's purpose and give the server meaning in their role. In short, that person can still feel fulfilled in their job, even if it's not their ultimate goal in life.

Everyone just wants to feel successful in their role and feel like a valuable part of their organization. We're all looking for autonomy, personal and professional growth, and an alignment of values.

Finding Purpose

The onus of facilitating the connection between the employee and the organization's purpose lies with the organization. It is responsible for ensuring all employees, from executive leadership to the frontline, connect with the purpose. But how do you define "purpose"?

The search for the meaning of life has been around as long as consciousness itself. While the meaning is hotly debated, fraught with emotion, and still completely unknown, there are scientific studies that tell us finding our purpose is critical to long-term happiness. Without purpose, there's little meaning in our lives.

This is also true at the organizational level. Every successful business needs a why: a purpose employees can connect with. Why does your organization exist? What is possible *because* your organization exists?

Leaders don't only need a clear *why* (the purpose or mission statement), they also need the *how* (the strategy that will get them there). And to achieve its own fulfillment, the organization must leverage culture (The Way).

When you combine employee fulfillment with organizational fulfillment (or, in other words, when your organization fulfills its mission), you reach the ultimate goal of the plan: growing your business and growing your people.

The benefits of encouraging employee fulfillment are clear:

- Seven out of ten employees would consider leaving their role for a more fulfilling one.
- Of those seven, a third would consider it even if the pay was lower.

And the best part is, 96 percent of workers believe they can be fulfilled by their work. So it is possible.

The Workplace of the Future: Measuring Employee Fulfillment

When companies send out emails urging employees to fill out an engagement survey, enthusiasm is generally low. So replacing that with an employee fulfillment survey won't do much good, but it would be a starting point. There is a better way, however. Here are some activities organizations can easily implement to help quantify fulfillment:

AI-powered tools

To "help" their employees maintain productivity, some organizations have turned to monitoring tools. While employee monitoring is minimally effective (companies who use it only see a seven percent increase in profit), it can increase resentment and take autonomy away from workers. However, when used correctly, these tools can monitor communications between employees to search for words that employers should be wary of ("toxic," "hate my job," "want to quit," etc). This helps leaders get a better sense of what workers really feel and say when they aren't afraid of retribution.

Certain AI-powered tools "listen" anonymously to text in email, Slack, and other work tools to understand the tone of the employees that work there. They search for keywords such as "toxic" or "happy" to understand the mindset of employees. This ability to listen is completely anonymous, immediately making it more attractive than an engagement survey.

Pulse check

Pulse checks are quick check-ins with employees that are short and frequent. These can be as simple as a text message at the end of the week, asking the employee only one question: How was your week? They should also be offered far more frequently than you would an engagement survey. This is one simple way for an employee to give feedback, as well as an opportunity for leaders to connect with them in a timely and relaxed manner.

Think of it as a quick check to see general health and well-being. If the engagement survey is like an annual physical, a pulse check is just taking your temperature. It will allow leaders to determine any immediate needs based on vital signs.

Performance reviews

Performance reviews aren't a novel idea; however, leaders can and should be making space in these reviews for the whole person. This means asking the employee what motivates them, what their passions are, and how to help them meet their personal goals.

These goals don't have to be private to be meaningful. Employees shouldn't be required to divulge, for example, that they'd like to lose 50 pounds. Instead, they could include something to the effect of, "read one book per month."

Reviews that look at the whole person are yet another opportunity to get a sense of how fulfilled employees are in their roles, as well as how they can be supported in order to excel both as a worker and as a person. After all, people don't want to just survive their jobs. They want to thrive.

Organizational reviews

Exit interviews are helpful for organizations in learning what is causing an employee to leave their role, but it's too little, too late. Instead, leaders should regularly have feedback exchanges with workers by not only offering feedback, but seeking it as well. These are often referred to as "stay interviews" or organizational reviews. 77 percent of employees want the opportunity to give feedback more than once per year. A feedback exchange allows the worker space to explain what is working for them or how the organization could assist them in connecting to purpose.
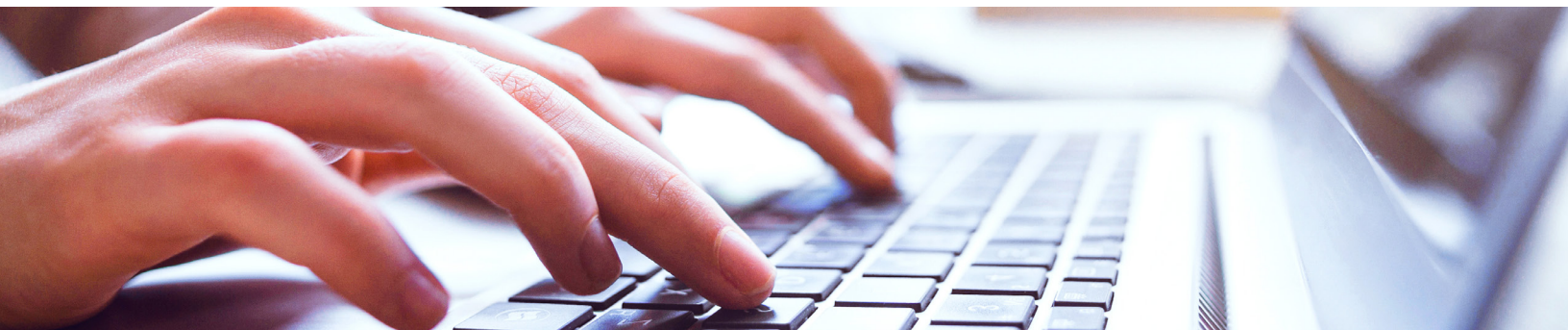
Cascading meetings

When senior leadership meets to align on strategy, organizational changes, goals, and more, everyone must be briefed. Yes, everyone. Executives meet with VPs, who then meet with the directors who report to them. These directors meet with managers and so on until every employee understands what is expected of them and how their role connects to the purpose.

These meetings should also cascade upwards. When frontline teams meet, managers are responsible for informing their leadership about the state of the team. Those leaders must then cascade the feedback higher up. Communication flow needs to move up and down. Everyone up to executive leadership should be made aware of any feedback received during meetings, which helps them understand to what extent employees feel fulfilled.

The popular CBS show *Undercover Boss*, now in its 11th season, gives viewers a glimpse of what happens when a CEO dives into what life on the frontline is like. For most of these CEOs, it's an eye-opening experience that can lead to significant organizational changes: in one episode, a leader realized his employees weren't being nurtured to move into management positions, even when they worked hard and proved they could handle the job, so he created a new "coach-to-grow" program, where high-performing employees were chosen and mentored by management.

A cascading meeting is an organic and more authentic version of *Undercover Boss*. Executive leadership gets a sense of how things are really operating and how happy people actually are.

If you must do surveys, ensure they create connection between the employee and the organization's purpose. Some questions to include are:

• Our purpose is (insert purpose here) — to what extent does this align with your personal purpose?

• To what extent do you feel you can fully develop your character and abilities in this role?

These questions speak to the whole person, not just the employee.

The Win-Win

Ultimately, we are all in charge of finding our own happiness and fulfillment. But leaders in every organization are uniquely positioned to improve their employees' lives. This, in turn, benefits the organization through higher retention, greater productivity, and more impactful outcomes. It helps the organization fulfill its own purpose: to make the world a better place in its own unique way.

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