

# Employee engagement: getting the best from your people

A Badenoch & Clark guide

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Everyone seems to be talking about employee engagement. While most employers would agree they'd like to see high levels of commitment and engagement from their workforce, for many it has become the Holy Grail of management.

According to the CIPD, employee engagement is about 'creating opportunities for employees to connect with their colleagues, managers and wider organisation. It is also about creating an environment where employees are motivated to want to connect with their work and really care about doing a good job.'

We probably all know instinctively that committed employees are much more productive and act as great ambassadors for the brand. They're less likely to take sick leave. They're more likely to remain loyal.

In this guide we provide a no-nonsense list of things you need to consider in pulling together an employee engagement programme.

## 1 Leadership is key

Effective leadership is important if you want to maintain a high level of employee engagement so here are some of the characteristics you would expect leaders to display. It's critical that the boss shows that they value their employees, after all employee engagement is a huge reflection of how the employee feels about their boss. We know through our recent workplace study research that career progression is a key retention tool. If you offer opportunities for employees, they are far more likely to be engaged with their job and the practice. Clarity of communication is vital; employees need to understand the vision of the firm, why it's important and what their role is in achieving it. Congratulating success and achievements, while showing how employees are contributing to the success of the firm in a meaningful way is paramount. With evidence to suggest that working in teams can be far more productive than working on an individual basis, leaders need to be team builders and create an environment that fosters trust and collaboration. In addition, leaders should show confidence in decision-making and uphold high ethical standards to maintain their firm's reputation.

## 2 Show that you have a plan

Whether in good times or bad, it's essential that employees are made aware of your practice strategy. It's very difficult for employees to feel engaged if they don't truly understand the direction the organisation is moving in, or why. In our Happiness at Work research conducted in May 2009, more than one in four (28%) UK workers said that they are told nothing about business performance, with one in twenty even being discouraged from asking questions of the management team. As well as creating a confused and nervous workforce, this stores up problems for the future. Whilst it may not result in huge numbers of people heading for the exit now, many firms will see a significant brain drain when the economy does recover and people feel more secure to move jobs.

Be transparent about your plans and in communicating your long-term strategy. Not only will you ensure that everyone is working towards a common goal, you demonstrate your confidence in the firm's future as it focuses on what you can do, rather than what you can't – particularly vital in these times of economic uncertainty. The result will be a committed and confident workforce who see

themselves as an integral part of your long-term plan and vision.

### 3 Create a sense of purpose

Employees need to feel a sense of purpose for being at work, a reason and motivation as to why they come in every day and work for someone else.

The public sector is often hailed as a flag-bearer for getting this right as it naturally attracts employees who want to make a difference to the wider community. But private practice can achieve the same commitment from its employees as long as the firm's values and purpose are clearly communicated. By understanding and believing in what the practice stands for, seeing the value in its services and seeing these delivered ethically and to a high standard, employees will have a clear sense of purpose and will feel more impassioned and committed to their objectives. Instilling a sense of purpose amongst your employees will ultimately give them the desire to contribute and really make a difference, which in turn will lead to higher motivation and productivity levels.

### 4 Values and culture

A practice's values are its DNA: they define how the firm behaves and what it intrinsically stands for. If your employees share these same values, of course they are more likely to believe in the firm. While recruiting lawyers who identify with your professional values is a good start, your practice culture must empower them as well.

A firm that prides itself on teamwork is likely to stifle its people if collaborative working isn't actively encouraged, recognised or barriers to it aren't removed, for instance. By fostering the type of environment where your chosen values can be lived, breathed and tangibly demonstrated, you are more likely to motivate your people to want to connect with their work, as the CIPD suggests.

### 5 Know what success looks like

It's human nature to aspire, whether personally, socially or professionally. So clearly communicate the vision of where your practice wants to be, and how every member of staff plays a part in achieving that aspiration by upholding the corporate strategy. Painting a picture of what success looks like - at an individual, team, divisional and practice level - will help keep it real and ultimately achievable. Ensure there are milestones and make these even more tangible by showcasing individual and firm successes along the way. Charting progress and recognising key milestones will help foster unilateral positivity, pride and a sense of achievement.

### 6 Offer recognition

Having an ongoing programme for recognising employees can be effective in creating a culture of appreciation and a highly motivated workforce. Recognising employees doesn't need to be an expensive exercise and it's often the personal touch which makes all the difference. However you do it, it should be linked to your practice

mission or vision. It's also important to encourage employees at all levels to openly and visibly recognise their colleagues, not always relying on the managing partners to be responsible for making it happen. Get your approach to recognition right and it could improve your financial performance. Research suggests that there is a direct link between employee satisfaction and customer satisfaction, and between customer satisfaction and improved financial performance.

### 7 Performance management

Your employees want to know where they stand and how they are doing. And they deserve to know too. Regular feedback on both an informal and formal basis is essential. Creating an ongoing adult to adult dialogue around agreeing reasonable yet stretching goals and performance improvements is a necessary part of any manager's role. Good performance management should be supportive, intended to bring out the best in people. All too often it is seen as the remedial action - and in some cases even a rather blunt tool for weeding out your poorer performers. But using performance management to manage out the under performers is just as likely to scare off your best performers too. In an ideal world your performance management should go beyond the set piece appraisals. Cultivate a culture that values open and actionable conversations.

### 8 Empowerment

People will flourish in an environment that builds independence, self-belief and personal achievement. As a manager, it is your responsibility to allow your people to be participative, involved, accountable, encouraged and to get on with the tasks they think they should be doing - to be treated like an adult no matter where they sit in the hierarchy. Giving your employees the leeway - and encouragement - to succeed is an essential building block of engagement. Focus on the results, rather than detailing exactly how the work should be done. Helping others to reach their true potential doesn't come easily to every manager, but micro-managing is a sure fire way of turning your employees off. Learn to strike the balance between giving your people enough space to use their abilities to best effect, whilst still monitoring and supporting closely enough to ensure that the job is done correctly and effectively.

### 9 What to communicate

It is reasonable for employees to expect to be kept informed and even more important in times of economic uncertainty and change - the alternative is a rumour mill. Employers need to think about what they are going to communicate. Show respect for your employees by not covering up bad news with positive spin or most people will be able to see straight through you - tell it how it is. Employees will not be able to help their practice area or firm to proactively embrace change if they are not made aware of the situation, what senior managements' view is and what the benefits of your chosen course of action will be. You need to be able to tell your employees what you expect of them, sympathise with their situation and publically recognise individual and team performances. In short, communicate as much as possible about

as much as possible. And don't worry about repeating yourself. Constant reinforcement of key messages improves memory and understanding.

## 10 How to communicate

There's no doubt about it: face to face communication is always the best – and particularly when times are challenging. Make good use of your line managers. Our research suggests that employees are far more likely to believe what their immediate boss tells them than

the senior management. Our recent Employment Study results showed an alarming 85% of UK workers wary of at least some of the information from higher up their organisation. Line managers can listen, debate and connect on an emotional level with their teams which is vital to building and maintaining trust. But beware, the big bang approach to communicating isn't enough. Constant reinforcement of key messages on a daily basis is essential. Email is no longer the weapon of mass communication and dialogue is crucial for engagement. Make appropriate use of all available mediums – company intranets, blogs, social networks, team briefings and newsletters all have their place.

### Related articles

**Banking & Financial Services workplace study**  
Spring 2009

**Focusing on engagement for business results**  
Roundtable summary, January 2009

**Don't neglect your employer brand**  
Issue 8, Connections, Badenoch & Clark

**Managing your way in difficult times**  
Issue 7, Connections, Badenoch & Clark

**Communication and attention: Why employee engagement has to start at the top**  
Issue 6, Connections, Badenoch & Clark

**Workforce in the dark**  
[www.happinessatworkindex.co.uk](http://www.happinessatworkindex.co.uk)

### Other Badenoch & Clark resources

**Workplace studies**  
Detailed analysis of current trends in employment. See [www.badenochandclark.com/for-employers](http://www.badenochandclark.com/for-employers) for further details.

**[www.market-talk.co.uk](http://www.market-talk.co.uk)**  
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**[www.happinessatworkindex.co.uk](http://www.happinessatworkindex.co.uk)**  
A quarterly index tracking employee happiness across the UK office workforce. Results by profession and region.

### Future guides

Throughout 2010 we will be producing a series of guides focusing on the key areas of attraction, retention and recruitment.

If you would like to get involved in any of these we'd be delighted to hear from you. Contact us at [connections@badenochandclark.com](mailto:connections@badenochandclark.com)

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