OPERATIONAL EXCELLENCE IN MANUFACTURING ORGANIZATIONS THROUGH EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT – A CRITICAL ANALYSIS ON THE DRIVING FACTORS OF EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT

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ABSTRACT

The concept of Employee Engagement has become a dominant factor in management thinking over the past two decades. Employee Engagement has evolved as a vital ingredient in Corporate Human Resources Strategies, as Organizations are keen in identifying the drivers of employee engagement, which would positively impact their success. A culture of employee engagement gets translated into positive outcomes in the form of enhanced overall production and operational efficiency. Every manufacturing organization is focusing their efforts on increasing the levels of employee engagement, as the global surveys show that there is a strong correlation between employee engagement and employee performance and business success. Manufacturing organizations face tough competition in terms of retention of employees, technological changes, global competition and there is need for an appraisal on their employee engagement strategies. This article, critically evaluates the various driving factors of employee engagement in manufacturing organizations.

KEYWORDS: Employee Engagement, Employee Engagement in Manufacturing Companies, Trends in Employee Engagement, Future of Employee Engagement, Employee Loyalty, Employee Retention, Quality Circle, Training & Development

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INTRODUCTION

DEFINITIONS AND LITERATURE REVIEW

William Kahn (1990:694) defines employee engagement as “the harnessing of organization members’ selves to their work roles; in engagement, people employ and express themselves physically, cognitively, and emotionally during role performances”.

Wellins and Concelman (2005) call employee engagement “the illusive force that motivates employees to higher levels of performance”.

The Gallup Organization, potentially the most widely recognized name associated with employee engagement due to their bestselling book, “First, Break All the Rules,” defines engaged employees as those, who “work with a passion and feel a profound connection to their company” and “drive innovation and move the organization forward” (GMJ, 2006).

The International Survey Research (ISR) defines employee engagement as, “a process by which an organization increases commitment and continuation of its employees to the achievement of superior results.” The ISR separates commitment into three parts; cognitive commitment, affective commitment, and behavioral commitment or think, feel and act.

In 2001, *N.P. Rothbard’s* definition described engagement as a psychological presence, with two key mechanisms, attention and absorption. Attention is “cognitive ability and the amount of time one spends thinking about a role” and absorption is “being engrossed in a role and refers to the intensity of one’s focus on a role” (*Saks*, 2006).

Maslach et al provide more clarity concerning this relationship by describing engagement dimensions (energy, involvement, efficacy) and burnout dimensions (exhaustion, cynicism, inefficacy) as complete opposites (*Saks*, 2006).

“It is the highest form of commitment, where, each one wants to do whatever he can for the benefit of the organization” (*Schmidt et al*, 2003)

“It is how employees feel, think and act with regard to the employer” (*Perryman, Robinson & Hayday*, 2004)

Meere (2005) described three levels of engagement:

- **Engaged** – employees who work with passion and feel a profound connection to their organization. They drive innovation and move the organization forward.
- **Not Engaged** – employees who attend and participate at work but put no passion or energy into their work.
- **Disengaged** – employees who are unhappy at work and who act out their unhappiness at work. According to *Meere* (2005), disengaged employees undermine the work of their engaged colleagues on a daily basis.

Drivers of Employee Engagement in Manufacturing Organizations

Effective Leadership

Quality of a leader significantly influences the performance of his team in executing the policies and goals of an organization. Highly engaged leaders tend to have highly engaged subordinates. The subordinates of highly engaged leaders never wish to leave their leaders. Leaders act as catalysts and drivers in enhancing the performance of his subordinates. Leadership has always played a significant role in building employee engagement, especially under contingencies, their role is even more crucial. Aon Hewitt analysis of companies with strong financial results shows that one distinguishing feature is the quality of their senior management. Senior managers’ levels of engagement are high and their ability to engage their fellow team members in their organization, particularly those in middle management, is strong and subsequently engaged managers are more likely to build engaged teams.

Behavioral change in a leader impacts on employee engagement. Engaged leaders tend to have a better understanding of their roles and the roles of their team members, hence they act as proactive coaches. The role played by leader in a manufacturing industry is significant as the entire organization waits for his direction. Especially, leaders in top management play a pivotal role in implementing the strategy of the organization and they build highly engaged teams.

They execute overall goals and strategies by building highly engaged teams. The primary role of leaders should be in building an effective, engaged, highly committed work force. Unless top management has engaged leaders, the organization as a team cannot succeed. In Organizations, where there is a transparency in communication from top management, mutual trust between the management, there is a resultant successful work force. Communication of periodical targets, strategy to achieve the same, skill enhancement required to facilitate the production process, adequate skilled manpower are some of the essential requisites for a manufacturing organization to succeed. Leaders must ensure that performance standards are clearly communicated and evaluated at regular intervals. Strong leadership and frequent communication are major ingredients of employee engagement, they are always important and crucial during difficult times, in order to even maintain employee engagement at current levels, let alone drive it higher.

Talent Acquisition - Efficient Skilled Human Resources

Human resources are the vital resources of an organization, and the entire gamut of success highly depends on them. Organizations must hire employees, who perfectly match the job requirements, enhance their skills through adequate training and development programmes, assist them with technical support and nurturing their technical skills and prepare them for innovation and change in technology. Organizations should develop a special technical training system to update and enhance the technical knowledge of employees that they feel motivated and geared up for technological changes. An engaged employee, who is very well trained in technologies tends to be loyal to the organization, where, his skill has been moulded and enhanced. He anticipates growth opportunities within the organization. Training and development has been identified as one of the major tools for retention of employees. Efficient and trained employees offer premium service in their roles and offer better quality of service, which would result in high performance, enhance production and in turn success to an organization. Effective recruitment and selection strategies have to be designed by top management to ensure that, right manpower is selected and employed in the organization. The success of an organization depends on the human capital it possesses. Researchers have identified that one employee has to be not only technically fit, but also Psychologically (Motivational), which ensures high levels of productivity, quality, attendance and retention.

Training and Development with Special Focus on Safety Engineering

Training and development enhances employee engagement by nurturing skills and facilitates employees to acquire new knowledge and improve their performance. Employees tend to feel doing a commendable job and that being valued by their organizations for their work excellence. Organizations investing in their human resources in the form of training and development are viewed as employee friendly, when compared with their peers. Employees have a sense of feeling, being valued for their contribution, and they get motivated for the efforts rendered by the organizations for their growth and development. Developing people is a vital aspect in retaining an engaged workforce and achieving business success. Studies show that only a least number of Workplace injuries and accidents takes place where, training is adequate. Training on equipment handling, ergonomics, electrical safety, action plans on emergency, hazard communication, automation of machinery, latest trends in machinery, machine guarding, safety equipments, total quality management, problem-solving skills, continuous improvement tools, modern machinery, plant floor capability would resolve experience issues and would enhance their work expertise, especially in manufacturing organizations. Training employees will increase productivity. Training enhances expertise and turn results in high performance and Productivity. Training employees would make them feel they are being valued. Staff training shows you value your employees. It motivates an employee and helps to instill a feel that he is recognized as a member of the team, and the organization has found him deserving to stay in the near future.

Training and development is a great retention tool.

A Survey Gallup's "2012 State of the American Worker" reported the impact of improved employee engagement on key performance indicators with 40 percent and above reduction in safety-related incidents and quality defects and a 37 percent reduction in employee absenteeism, whereas, Productivity and profitability, meanwhile, each saw an increase above 20 percent. Organizations provide extensive training coinciding with workforce development goals, either by their own training and development team or by collaborating with other organizations. Developing skill sets is observed as a strategic imperative that must be pursued with intent, which would result in the success of an organization.

Towers Perrins, 2003 have identified the fundamental for engagement as strong leadership, accountability, autonomy, a sense of control over one's environment and opportunities for development (*Towers Perrin*, 2003). Investing in people in the form of training and development helps them to acquire new skills; this in turn enhances their skill levels and facilitates to move to the next level of their career ladder. Training programs helps employees to develop personally and professionally. Skill enhancement makes an employee feel that he is being valued in the organization, which would definitely result in performance excellence.

Managers should encourage employees to take full advantage of any educational opportunities provided by their organization in their area of operation. Gaining additional certifications and education will allow employees to stay up-to-date in their field, as well as give them the tech knowledge on how tools they need to perform and excel in their jobs. Programmes like mentoring will enhance employee's knowledge and help them in identifying his career priorities. When an organization offers education and training programmes, it not only enhances the skills of employees, but also helps the organization to grow. When it comes to educational advancement, employers need to remember that by helping their employees grow, they will ultimately help the organization grow. Thus, a training and development programme ultimately offers a win-win situation for the organization and employees. Apart from enhancing corporate potential, an organization can build a workforce that is engaged, motivated and experiences long-term value staying with your organization.

Ergonomics and Engagement

Ergonomics programmes are significant components in driving employee engagement, which gets translated into plant safety and improved efficiency. Ergonomic practices include involving various teams like Quality Management, process re - engineering, purchasing and material Management, innovation and current technologies, ambience and reshaping work environment to plan changes. Engaging employees in ergonomics process would heighten ergonomics awareness, would enthuse employees to generate improvement ideas and put forth more improvement ideas and opportunities, and would result in more ergonomic improvement projects. The essential part of ergonomics programme is building a safety culture. Engaging employees as team members in ergonomics programmes is a perfect opportunity to inculcate a safety culture in an organization. Ergonomics programmes would ensure team members to embrace innovation and improvements and would remove resistance for change and facilitates to embrace innovation. Ergonomic would enhance the organization's ability not only to maintain a safe work environment, but also maximizes employee performance and increases productivity and engagement.

Employee Communication

The rapid pace of change in most organizations means, it is time for internal communicators to bring in a paradigm shift in the approach on the organization's internal communication to employees. Communication between

employees on the floor and between workers and management is another important aspect of plant operations leadership, which would leverage employee engagement. Organizing plant communication meetings, open hall reviews, quality circles, daily mailers, internal newsletters would keep all team members well informed about the business-critical information, current trends in the industry, innovation and technology trends, progress on production targets etc. communication is an opportunity to build a relationship between the management and the employees. Management should make use of this opportunity to make them feel they are very an integral part of the organization. Communication between management and employees should be consistent. No longer have Organizations remained as an announcer of quarterly, half yearly and annual performance results, they remain as a custodian of engaging employees through consistent communication with them. New roles of internal communication are developing and it is crucial to get this delivery right. Where practitioners embrace new ways of working, there is an opportunity to put internal communication centre stage in an organization and lead on engaging the workforce. Strong strategic narrative, engaging managers, employee voice and integrity are the vital components of employee communication. It results in empowering leadership that provides a strong strategic narrative about the organization on its vision and goals, and how far it has been travelling towards it? It aims at engaging managers to have constant communication with them and enabling them to stay engaged towards the goals of the organization. Empowering employee voice plays a significant role as solutions can be arrived at, if employees are given chance to voice out their opinions and suggestions. Values of an organization are an implied communication, which enhances internal motivation of employees. An organization having consistent communication with its employees tends to strike a balance between the organizational objectives and employee performance.

Effective Organizational and Human Resource Policies and Practices

People are the main resources that organizations have for delivering its services. Strategic Human Resources policies directly link with the policies of an organization's strategic plan and results in deciding meaningful roles tied to the strategic direction of the organization. Policies and procedures both communicate the values of an organization. Employee friendly policies always have a positive impact and would result in employee engagement. *Maslach et al. (2001)* identified six areas of work-life leading to engagement: workload, control, rewards and recognition, community and social support, perceived fairness, and values. Employees should be aware of the vision statement of the organization and they should be able to evaluate why the organization exist. Employees should be emotionally attached to the vision of the organization and believe in what they perform, and should remain committed and loyal to the organization. Good Employers wish to make their organization, the best place to work, by having a clearly articulated employee value proposition and delivering on clearly articulated promises to employees. Executive interviews reveal a real contrast between Best Employers and average companies with regard to the employee value proposition. Corporate Policies and Human Resources Strategies that are conducive to employee growth and development enhance the level of employee engagement.

Innovation and Employee Engagement

Successful organizations are always vibrant to innovation and grow with updated technologies. Manufacturing organizations should adapt latest technologies to cope with the competition from their peers. Innovation drives employee engagement, and research have shown that engaged employees are more innovative. The landmark McLeod Report (2009) explains that high levels of employee engagement are positively correlated with high levels of innovation. A study by Krueger & Killham (2007) published by the Gallup Management Journal shows that that 59% of engaged employees say that their role brings the best of their creative ideas. The Quality of Working Life 2007 study by Chartered Management

Institute states that there is a relatively low sickness and absenteeism in workplaces, where innovative management system exists. Hence, it is obvious that wellbeing of employees by way of engagement benefit lower absenteeism levels. People feel proud to work in organizations, where innovation is given high importance. C. Brooke Dobni in an article states that there is strong relationship between innovation and Human resource strategy and managers can influence in bringing an innovative culture. People wish to work in and innovative organization and this is a good retention tool for management. Else, they would look for organizations which are innovative and exit. All manufacturing organizations should adapt a system off innovation that employees get motivated and wish to remain in the organization, in the longer run.

Group Dynamics and Work Teams

When effective teams are developed and supported, the morale of the team increases resulting in cohesiveness, and every member feels proud to a part of the team. This would instill esprit de corps and camaraderie in the organization. This would result in the increase of belongingness and Trust within the team and organization. Quality circles are common in manufacturing organizations. Quality Circles are a team of employees working in a same work area come together to discuss production and process issues and find a solution to their problems. They come out with suggestions and improvement ideas. Such work teams enhances the morale of the participating employee, feels recognized and tend to perform and contribute better. *Cooper* (1997) states managed emotions at work can drive trust, loyalty and commitment and great productivity gains by individuals, teams and organizations. Engaged employees are likely to have a greater attachment to their organization and a lower tendency to quit. (*Schaufeli and Bakker*, 2004) Truss et al (2006) confirmed, engaged employees are less likely to leave their employer. Sigmund Freud has noted the difference in behavior between individuals and individuals as a group's members, which is termed as individual difference, and states that every individual is unique. Belonging to a particular group or team makes people feel, think and behave in a more perfect manner. Uniform intensity prevailing among the group members during organizational activities increases emotional involvement of the group members and motivates them to be a part of the group. Corporate leaders, who foresee the significance of group dynamics to produce a culture of positive employee engagement are able to identify increased effectiveness, improved performance and better business results in their organizations. According to *Bachmann* (2006), "the contemporary workplace has become increasingly diverse, multicultural and multifaceted and there is a need for managing groups in a way to enhance group engagement". An organization becomes engaged, when the groups in it remain engaged. Supervisors and middle level managers, being leaders in smaller groups in the bottom levels of the organizations need to play significant role in designing strategies to cater the engagement needs of their groups.

Performance Management and Employee Recognition

Performance management is an ongoing process, where the manager/supervisor and employee work together to plan, monitor and review an employee's work objectives or goals and overall contribution to the organization. Performance against the set Key result Areas (KRAs) and motivates employees to do their best. It facilitates on-going, constructive feedback on performance, identifies plans for improving performance. Skill gap identification and recommendation for training and development helps the employee to feel that he is being valued in the organization. Rewarding high performers motivates others to perform and enhances a positive work culture.

Employees exhibiting high job behavioral engagement are motivated to develop themselves and take the initiative. High levels of organizational behavioral engagement are found in employees, who are proactive in highlighting problems and suggesting improvements for the benefit of their organizations.

Understanding various dimensions of engagement can help organizations to determine the focus of the performance management system. The research done by Society for Human Resources Management (SHRM) on “the link between Performance Management and Employee Engagement in Western multinational corporations operating across India and China found that particular facets of performance management drive different types of engagement. In terms of the performance management process, having a broad range of outcomes which are valued by the employee viz., promotion, training, and reward are associated with all dimensions of employee engagement”. Performance management is inferred as an integrated process, in which managers and employees come together to set expectations, measure and review results and reward performance, in order to improve employee performance, with the ultimate aim to positively affect organizational success” (Den Hartog, *et al.*, 2004: 557). Such practices are being recognized as significant in high performing organizations (Kirby, 2005). Particularly empowerment enhancing practices have been found to have a significant impact on employee commitment (Gardner, *et al.*, 2001). Despite this idea that performance management practices have particular significance for notions of employee engagement, as yet evidence of the direct linkage is weak (Guest, *et al.*, 2003).

Compensation and Employee Rewards

The survey findings published by World at Work on “The Impact of Rewards Programs on Employee Engagement concludes that Organizations that motivates managers to engage employees by making engagement as an important dimension of performance. Performance criteria and rewarding engagement through incentive programs indicate that their organizations more effectively foster employee engagement and motivation than those organizations that do not”. Organizations develop performance metrics that measure the extent to which supervisors or managers encourage engagement among their subordinates. Reward supervisors and managers for developing employee engagement among their subordinates and peers. Specifically define employee engagement and include it as goal in the strategic HR plan. Quality of leadership had the strongest relationship with effectively engaging and motivating employees. Hence, organizations should plan good compensation packages to attract leaders, who have demonstrated their ability on engaging employees. Organizations should focus in terms of total rewards and not just financial rewards in terms of better work environment or organization climate, work-life balance, better quality of the work, and career opportunities.

Though compensation not ranked the most important, it is an important factor in job satisfaction. An employee who feels adequately compensated monetarily is more likely to stay with an organization. Motivating employees through rewards and recognition programmes, instant awards boosts employees’ morale and enhances the feel of job satisfaction. Employees would feel that their efforts has been valued and recognized. Internal communications like e-mail updates, newsletters with writings on a “Star Performer “Star team of the month” will definitely motivate employees. Organizations can improve employee engagement through a total rewards focus. Employee research reveal engagement can be improved by taking a holistic view of compensation, benefits, learning and development, and work environment. Analysis of Executive interviews indicate that performance recognition and performance development are the key areas within total rewards that are most relevant to improving engagement and the data shows a clear 20% average gap between how the “Best Employers” and the “Rest ” of companies are perceived to be rewarding their employees. These data suggest that not only it is important to get the basic pay and benefits needs right, but that leaders also need to focus on recognizing performance and developing talent for the future.

Workplace Wellness Initiatives and Safety Programmes

A healthy workplace gives priority to the physical, spiritual, environmental, intellectual, emotional, occupational and mental health of employees. Wellness promotion doesn't just benefit the employee but fills an organization with healthy employees and it becomes a productive workplace that retains its employees. "A study on the Link between Safety and Organizational Performance by *Towers Watson safety studies* has found that a focus on safety can improve organizational performance in multiple areas. According to a 2005 industry survey by Liberty Mutual, more than 40% of senior executives firmly believe that increased productivity is the main benefit of an effective workplace safety program, with more than 60% reporting that each \$1 invested in injury prevention returns at least \$2".

Harvard Business School Professor Michael Porter expressing his views in *Job Safety & Health Quarterly*, 14(1), supports the notion that these savings are typical for companies focused on improving work place safety. An emphasis on safety not only stimulates employee engagement, but also improves product design, fosters innovation, boosts morale and reduces production costs. In addition to improved organizational performance, a strong safety orientation affects the organizational image both externally with the public and internally with its employees. By focusing on enhancing workplace safety, a company can boost its employee engagement levels and improve its image in the community. Employees need to be engaged in their work and have to be able to be productive and successful. One of the major tools that organizations have at their disposal is to enhance health condition of their employees to make them productive. The best way to motivate employees is to make them realize that the employer is interested in their health and wellbeing. The approach is applicable to the employee as well as his family. Organizations offer health benefits to the employee and his dependants in the form of medical and health insurance. Healthy employees will be at work and receptive to the firm's goals and objectives. On the contrary, unhealthy employees may absent to work and have intermittent break which frequently distracts the alignment of individual effort with the firm's goals and objectives. Employees who are struggling with health issues of their own or family members will struggle to contribute at the work place. A sense of optimum health and wellness among employees and their family members is a powerful engagement factor. Health or lack of health is among the most important elements impacting an employee's performance. Apart from productivity and financial performance, it impacts attraction and retention of talent, customer loyalty, innovation, and enhanced corporate goodwill. Successful wellness programmes provide employees with the motivation and tools necessary to be successful in their jobs. The fact that the organization provides them with tools to improve their health creates a sense of belongingness and a bond with the company. The ability of employers to effectively engage and enable employees to make better lifestyle options helps them to convert them as a meaningful advantage in workplace. Better wellness programmes helps an organization to optimize the contribution of their employees, as well as to mitigate the substantial financial burden that results from employees' unhealthy behaviors. Meaningful feedback from employees helps an organization to design corporate wellness policies, which impacts employee engagement to a greater extent.

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR)

CSR is gaining momentum these days, as corporate have recognized the need to serve the community around them. They join hands with the employees in activities like visiting Orphanages, Old agehomes, Distribution and planting tree saplings, providing educational support, Sponsoring health care programmes etc. Employees feel that they are a part of a social initiative and able to contribute to the society in some way. The organization, in turn, generates goodwill among the employees and society. The role played by CSR enhances the reputation of an organization among its employees, thereby boosting their motivation and engagement. CSR policy of an organization that embeds at the heart of a business

can not only enable them to make a genuine difference to society, but also deliver a tangible benefit to the firm in the long term. Organizations that are worried about the cost of implementing CSR policies should find out the ways on how to deliver true win-win situations, engaging and improving brand reputation and goodwill among external and internal stakeholders, contributing to the development of employees and ensuring they are happy and proud of the organization they belong to and motivated to give their best to their organization. Engaging employees in driving CSR initiatives helps them to believe that they are very well a part of their organization and the organization has enabled them to serve the society. Employees get emotionally attached to the organization and tend to remain there for a longer tenure. CSR perception shape the employees' attitudes, value perspective and behavior towards their firms. Performance of an organization is likely to improve, because employees perceive a socially responsible organization as a fair organization and reciprocate this fairness through commitment, loyalty and increased productivity. CSR is linked to employee engagement through reduced costs due to increased employee retention as well as improved reputation in the eyes of employees and society.

CONCLUSIONS

Research have revealed there is a strong correlation between employee engagement and business performance and reports by the Gallup Organization shows an increase in corporate profitability due to the increase in employee engagement. Evidence also suggests that employee engagement is related to emotional experiences and wellbeing (May *et al* 2004). Researchers have also inferred that emotional factors have a correlation with an individual's personal satisfaction they get from their work place and by being a part of their organization (Towers Perrin 2003). An individual's intention to leave their organization is one of the fundamental criteria to determine how an employee perceives his work. Engaged employees are likely to have a greater emotional attachment towards their organization (Schaufeli and Bakker 2004; Truss *et al* 2006). Better management of engagement drivers enables an organization to reduce an organization's attrition and recruitment costs. It has been identified that the longer employees stay with an organization, the less become less engaged (Ferguson 2007 and Truss *et al* 2006). Hence, organizations should emphasize employee engagement catering to the different needs of employees through Interventions in job design, providing challenging task, autonomy and freedom, career planning, Job enrichment etc. Organizations that have flexible, but clearly defined career paths along with effective recognition policies in terms of monetary and monetary rewards based on performance certainly differentiate themselves from other organizations and impacts higher levels of employee engagement. Manufacturing organizations should focus on employee engagement and there should be paradigm shift in their human resources strategy from the earlier industrial relations approach to enable optimum use of human resources and thereby retaining the human capital.

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