



# EMPLOYEE OPINION SURVEYS

WHY LEADING BRANDS ARE BULLISH ON IT

## **Abstract**

**“...engagement as a construct could be modelled using  
three key dimensions; trait, psychological state and  
behavior”**

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“The notion of employee engagement is a relatively new one, one that has received considerable attention from practitioners within the business community and academic researchers.”

The evolution of markets in Ghana's fledgling capitalist economy has spurred intense competition in certain sectors such as banking, telecommunication, brewery and quite recently, pharmaceuticals. The reliance on common supply chains by market operators in these competitive markets, has over time shifted the source of competitive advantage from access to resources such as immovable properties, financing and cheap inputs, to technology, management excellence and the sheer depth of skill inventory available in their Human Resource portfolios. So goes the evolving business narrative that a company's strategic dominance in any competitive market depends, to a considerable extent, on quality human resource more than the size of its operating assets. To this end high performing brands/companies takes strenuous steps to assess the state and condition of their employees and ensure all views are incorporated into management decision-making to ensure alignment and drive balance sheet growth.

In recent times, new management thinking has evolved around human resource utilization, with greater emphasis been placed on engagement as a complement to the skill and competency narrative. This may be the central reason [we believe] why leading

brands such as Barclays Bank, Zenith Bank, IBM, Nestle, to name a few, place paramount value on employee opinions

regarding myriad issues within their companies. There may be other reasons for such fetish interest in employee views exhibited by these high-performance brands. Management may be interested in assessing reasons for strategy failure, operational weaknesses, leadership perception etc.

The notion of employee engagement is a relatively new one, one that has received considerable attention from practitioners within the business community and academic researchers. The focus has nonetheless been on how to accurately model this complex construct in a manner that lends itself to measurement and management control in order to ensure positive organizational outcomes. Casual observation suggests that much of the appeal to organizational management is driven by claims that employee engagement drives bottom-line results. Indeed research have established a compelling relationship between engagement and profitability through higher productivity; sales growth, employee retention and customer satisfaction. Although a trendy management fad, the concept of engagement lacks clear consensus as to its concrete expression in a typical working environment. Indeed, many consultants avoid defining the term, rather referring only to its much vaunted

positive outcomes. Undoubtedly, this is a matter of immense significance to companies such as Metis Decisions LLC, who develop and conduct employee surveys in organizations, simply because the end users of these products expect interpretations of the results to be couched in terms of actionable insights, and justifiably so. It is therefore imperative for client companies to know and understand what is being measured, so as to fully grasp the change implications of any actionable insight generated from such survey. Anything less will be, at best, vague and, at worst, a squandered investment in consulting fees paid to a survey vendor.

## So What Does Engagement Mean, Really!

Before you hire any survey vendor or management consultant to conduct an employee survey within your organization, it is vital to have an intelligent conversation about your expectations and define very clearly what is to be measured by the survey and why. Failure to do this may create a default situation where the vendor or consultant might bamboozle you with technical jargons that may be of little relevance or value. Various definitions of employee engagement can be derived from the practice and research-driven literatures. Underpinning all these definitions is the notion that employee engagement is a desirable condition with immense significance for organizational cohesion and financial performance. It is essentially a psychological construct that connotes

involvement, commitment, passion, enthusiasm, focused effort, and energy. The concept measures the extent to which employees commit to someone or something in their organization, how hard they work, and how long they stay as a result of that commitment. In these and similar definitions, two possible threads of reasoning are implied: organizational commitment and task/goal commitment.

Suffice to say it has both attitudinal and behavioral

components. Wellins and Concelman (2005)

argued that engagement is “the illusive force that motivates employees to higher (or lower) levels of performance.”

Colbert et al (2004)

defined engagement in terms of a “high internal motivational state.” Similarly, Avolio, and Shamir (2002) defined active engagement in terms of “high levels of activity, initiative, and responsibility.” Again, all aforesated definitions emphasizes both attitudinal and behavioral dimensions of engagement, a point to keep in mind as it has implications for measurement.



## Various Perspectives on Engagement

Flowing from the definitions, engagement as a construct could be modelled using three key dimensions; trait, psychological state and behavior. Trait engagement is the disposition or attitudinal posture of the individual that

determines his/her level of attachment or involvement in pursuing organizational goals productively and without much supervision. Psychological engagement depicts positive emotional feelings and state of mind such as commitment, involvement, pride in associating with the company's brand, and positive energy. Behavioral engagement is the concrete expression of positive and emotional intelligent behaviors that depicts a perfect alignment between individual and corporate goals. Behaviors such as proactive initiative, adaptability, responsibility, and corporate citizenship are all behavioral evidence of an engaged employee. Bulk of both academic and professional literature on engagement seem to focus the discussion on engagement as a psychological state for one simple reason. It apparently is the only dependent and independent variable among the three models; trait, state and behavior. One's psychological/emotional state of being is dependent on traits (temperament, assumptions, worldview etc.) and in turn sets the tone for behavioral pattern. The model categorization sets a clear framework for measuring engagement and also helps reduce the confusion between measures of satisfaction on hand and engagement on the other.

The current practice gaining traction in the consulting space is a measurement approach that addresses state (psychological) and behavioral engagement on different dimensions. State or psychological engagement has various dimensions that ought to form the

basis of any corporate survey purporting to measure engagement:

- Engagement as commitment
- Engagement as involvement
- Engagement as empowerment
- Engagement as positive affectivity

## Engagement as Commitment



Some practitioners define engagement in terms of organizational commitment. Commitment is regarded as a psychological state of attachment or binding force between an individual and the organization (Meyer, Becker, & Vandenberghe, 2004). In measuring organizational commitment industry practice in the management consulting field have converged around the concept of belonging, personal meaning, and feelings of inclusion and personal identification with organizational mission and values. In recent times these measures have been broadened to cover additional concepts of “discretionary effort” and pride in associating with the company.

It is important to note that the measures of commitment are measures of the psychological state of commitment and

are not descriptions of the conditions that might yield that commitment. Thus, involvement, pride, ownership, value alignment etc. and other such measures of positive emotional state should be the primary focus of employee surveys in a bid to unearth the level of engagement in the company. This point is extremely crucial for two reasons:

1. Any misunderstanding would lead to a situation where surveys focus on measuring job satisfaction rather than state or behavior engagement.
2. Particularly in a highly unionized labor market such as Ghana's, the tendency for employers to focus on monetary incentives as primary driver of "engagement" is high. In such instance, perceptual bias would affect an accurate measurement of engagement drivers.

## Engagement as Behaviors

Engagement can be regarded as a directly observable behavior in the work context. It is common to define employee engagement as putting forth "discretionary effort," defined as extra time, brainpower, and energy (Towers-Perrin, 2003), with the frame of reference implied but perhaps not having been made explicit. Others refer to "giving it their all", and some combine effort with commitment in the definition with similarly somewhat ambiguous frames of reference. Clearly, the concept of engagement in the behavioral sense is a tricky area as

some employees with different frame of reference may exhibit positive performance behaviors albeit with different levels of impact or perhaps with varying emotional or psychological influences. To this point, true engagement implies something special, extra, or what some may refer to as OK +1.

Having said that, it is conceivable that an entire organization may have some employees who may be engaged more than others. Therefore any survey or measurement effort must do well to set a predefined standard as a denominator for assessing the mean or median position as far as engagement is concerned.

## Drivers of Engagement

Conditions of the workplace have both direct and indirect effects on state and behavioral engagement. The nature of work (e.g., challenge, variety etc.) and the nature of leadership (especially transformational leadership) are the conditions that arguably has the most definitive bearing on levels of engagement at the work place. The degree to which an employee's job content and context excites the human faculties undoubtedly forms a bedrock of enhanced performance and positive outcomes including work/life balance. Also, leadership at all levels, particularly at line level greatly impacts the state and level of employee engagement. The leader's greatest impact is felt by his/her direct reports, since proximity offers a better chance of judging integrity and

character, which are the main ingredients of trust. Generally, measures of corporate culture (teamwork, result-orientation, creative competition, respect for people etc.) provides a reflection of how the building blocks of engagement are aligned to produce sterling corporate performance. In summary, the drivers of engagement may include but not limited to:

- ▶ Trust and Integrity
- ▶ Nature of the Job
- ▶ Line-of Sight Between Individual & Company Performance
- ▶ Career Growth Opportunities
- ▶ Coworkers/Team Members
- ▶ Employee Development
- ▶ Personal Relationship with One's Manager

In measuring engagement therefore, assessment in these areas act as pointers to validate or disprove the conclusion obtained by way of the survey results.

## The Measurement Pitfalls

In many instances, the measures of engagement used by some management consultants (survey vendors) are highly similar to the measures used for assessments of job satisfaction (or climate or culture), albeit with a new label. Engagement is above and beyond simple satisfaction which focuses on the “acceptability” of employment arrangement—characteristics that most companies have measured for many

years. Engagement, in contrast, is about passion and commitment, the willingness to invest oneself and engage in discretionary effort to help the employer succeed.

Although there may be room for satisfaction within the engagement construct, engagement connotes activation, whereas satisfaction connotes satiation. In addition, although “satisfaction” surveys that ask employees to describe their work conditions may be relevant for assessing the conditions that provide for engagement (state and/or behavioral), they do not directly address the question of whether or not an employee is engaged. Such measures require an intelligent inference to draw accurate conclusions about engagement, rather than assessing engagement itself. This has practical significance because any advice a consultant proffers to a client-company's management on how to address engagement issues, requires a similar inference to make meaningful impact.

Interestingly, many traditional measures of satisfaction include items that shares the conceptual space of engagement. For instance, enthusiasm is regarded as a hallmark of engagement by many, yet its significance as an indicator of employee satisfaction is a matter of consensus. Nonetheless, the conceptual similarity of items used in engagement and satisfaction surveys indicates the general confusion between the two concepts.

In measuring engagement therefore,

care must be taken not focus on the building blocks themselves but rather the inferential conclusion it makes about employee engagement.

## Getting Started

Arguably, many companies in Ghana may now be warming up to the idea of surveying their employees on a regular basis in order to tap into the rich mine of knowledge for shaping corporate strategy. We (Metis Decisions LLC) have enumerated four important keys below to help you maximize return on investment in hiring a survey vendor:

1. As set out in this article, you must pay close attention to the imperceptible nuance between measures of satisfaction and that of engagement as the two concepts has different implications for management action and talent management strategy. Most leading brands have developed a sixth sense for making that distinction. Therefore if your company is serious about building competitive strength, measuring employee engagement through surveys is not a luxury but an imperative. Metis Decisions uses a simple yet powerful cloud application to administer online surveys for our corporate clients. Our value proposition; ease of use, cost-effectiveness and insightful reporting.

2. Hire knowledgeable consultants who clearly understand the mechanics of employee engagement and how to measure it in order to extract from the survey results, actionable insights for better HR decisions. With a solid track record and the knowledge base, Metis Decisions LLC is uniquely positioned to deliver superior results to our corporate clients in this regard.

3. Make sure that your Service Level Agreement (SLA) fully captures all measures that focuses on unearthing the state of engagement and not just a description of work conditions that may measure satiation and not engagement.



4. As the client, you must insist that the reporting is relevant, ensuring that the recommendations derive its logic from the insights obtained through the survey and is amenable to SMART change management. This is the best way to optimize your return on investment in hiring a survey vendor. It is also a sure way to join the ranks of leading global brands that are innovating with cutting-edge solutions to create value for their shareholders, because they dared to unleash the potential of their people.



Metis Decisions Limited is a professional services company. Contact us for your Employee Surveys, Corporate Training and Mystery Shopping services. For further info please visit [www.metisdecisions.com](http://www.metisdecisions.com) or email to [info@metisdecisions.com](mailto:info@metisdecisions.com).



*"Metis Decisions Limited delivered tremendous value by guiding our management team through a corporate change project that we embarked on in 2013. We particularly found their consultative approach to assessing needs and value chain gaps very satisfying."*

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