What are the origins of Strengths Engagement Index™?

Dr Paul Brewerton and James Brook, Strengths Partnership Ltd

1. What is employee engagement and why does it matter?

Employee engagement is a workplace approach designed to ensure that employees are committed to their organisation’s goals and values, motivated to contribute to organisational success, and are able at the same time to enhance their own sense of well-being.

Vance (2006), who wrote SHRM’s (the US Society for Human Resource Management) ‘Employee Engagement and Commitment Report’ (http://www.shrm.org/about/foundation/research/Documents/1006EmployeeEngagementOnlineReport.pdf), states that “employees who are engaged in their work and committed to their organizations give companies crucial competitive advantages—including higher productivity and lower employee turnover.”

Pre-dating modern definitions of engagement, workplace researchers had put forward a variety of accounts of the factors involved in the relationship between employees and their employer, including: job satisfaction, job involvement, organisational commitment and employee motivation, e.g. Hackman and Oldham (1980) and Bandura (1977).

The first formal definition of employee engagement was put forward in around 25 years ago, as “the harnessing of organisation members' selves to their work roles; in engagement, people employ and express themselves physically, cognitively, and emotionally during role performances” Kahn (1990).

Definitions of engagement today vary in the emphasis they give to the individual versus the organisation in creating engagement. Capturing this, the author of a recent report on employee engagement in the UK defines engagement as being “…about how we create the conditions in which employees offer more of their capability and potential.” (MacLeod, 2009).

The MacLeod review, cited in the UK CIPD’s (Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development) introduction to employee engagement (http://www.cipd.co.uk/hr-resources/factsheets/employee-engagement.aspx), summarised four ‘enablers’ that should be fundamentals of any employee engagement strategy:

- Leadership that gives a ‘strong strategic narrative about the organisation, where it has come from and where it is going’
- Line managers who motivate, empower and support their employees
- Employee ‘voice’ throughout the organisation, to challenge or reinforce the status quo and involve employees in decision making
- ‘Organisational integrity’: stated values are embedded into organisational culture: what we say is what we do.
A widely used framework for assessing engagement is the ‘Say, Stay, Strive’ model. The model is often associated with global HR consulting firms such as Towers Perrin and Hewitt Associates, and states that engaged employees will...

1. ...advocate the organisation as a good place to work (‘say’)
2. ...remain with the organisation if offered a similar role with similar terms and conditions elsewhere (‘stay’)
3. ...apply discretionary effort, going ‘above and beyond’ what they are asked to do at work (‘strive’).

Daniel Pink’s (2009) recent writings on motivation have also captured and popularised a number of these ideas, summarising key human motivators and drivers of engagement at work as being:

- Autonomy (being in control of work)
- Mastery (being competent and skilled)
- Purpose (work having meaning).

Those employees who experience sufficient levels of each of these factors are argued to be more engaged and more productive in their work.

Stress and well-being at work are generally thought to be influenced by many of the variables captured by the motivation and engagement researchers. For example, stress levels are reportedly directly related to levels of autonomy and mastery in work tasks, as well as role clarity and involvement in decisions (HSE, 2008). In addition, researchers have found that social support and positive, productive relationships at work are central to employees experiencing well-being and lowered stress at work.

Schaufeli and Bakker (2010) have recently explored the concept of engagement, developing a three dimensional model, comprising:

- Vigour – a sense of energy for work
- Dedication – a sense of pride in one’s work and challenge from it
- Absorption – being engrossed in work and experiencing a sense of ‘flow’ (a term popularised by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi).

As regards engagement driving positive organisational outcomes, in 2009, Harter et al conducted a meta-analysis of existing literature on engagement and productivity (including data from 32,000 business work units and almost a million employees) and found that business/work units scoring in the top half on employee engagement essentially double their odds of success in comparison to those in the bottom half. Those at the 99th percentile have nearly five times the success rate as those at the 1st percentile.

From the above brief literature review, our summary of key factors involved in engagement is as follows:

- Understanding how you can make a contribution at work and how your contribution makes a difference to the organisation and society
- Having autonomy in delivering work tasks in line with strengths
- Availability of adequate social support
- Being positively stretched in areas of strength
- Being given feedback on progress towards goals and on how an employee is delivering value to the task and organisation, i.e. being valued for a reason
- Advocating for the organisation.

It was these factors that we focused on when developing our Strengths Engagement Index™, to assess levels of workplace engagement and shift in engagement over time.

2. What is the Strengths Engagement Index™?

Strengths Partnership’s Strengths Engagement Index™ (SEI) was developed as a measure to help organisations:

(a) gain an insight into the current levels of engagement of their employees
(b) assess the relative shift in engagement reported by employees before and after they experience a strengths-based intervention, e.g. team development, personal development, leadership development.

The reason for assessing ‘shift’ in engagement was to provide clients with an opportunity to demonstrate ‘return on investment’ (RoI) in strengths interventions.

Research by James Heskett and his colleagues (Heskett at al, 1994; Heskett et al, 1997; Vance, 2006, presents a similar, simpler model) developed a ‘service-profit chain’ model based on many of these ideas, with the following links put forward in their research:

- Customer/stakeholder satisfaction and loyalty drives profit and growth
- Value drives customer satisfaction
- Employee productivity drives value
- Employee satisfaction and loyalty drives productivity
- The quality of the employee’s day-to-day working experience drives loyalty and satisfaction
- Effective leadership underlines the model’s success.

Our simplified model below shows how a focus on employee strengths can increase engagement and productivity, so driving organisational value and subsequent positive customer/stakeholder outcomes.

We feel that Heskett et al’s (1994; 1997) point about effective leadership is also well made (supported by Rath and Conchie, 2008, for example) and we have developed a separate leadership measure – StrengthscopeLeader™ – to address this directly. For more on this, see here: http://www.strengthspartnership.com/why-strengthscope/strengthscopeleader/
With Strengths Engagement Index™, we wanted to provide clients with a way of assessing part of this model, to satisfy stakeholders that an investment in strengths-based learning and development was worthwhile.

In developing Strengths Engagement Index™, Strengths Partnership’s team of business psychologists, L&D and HR professionals drew on all of the research summarised in Section 1, and more, including our own practical experience of the drivers of engagement, to develop our question set.

The questionnaire takes two minutes to complete, asking employees a series of questions about their current levels of engagement. Following on from their participation in an L&D intervention, typically focusing on them understanding and building on their strengths, employees respond to the same set of questions, as well as an additional set of 6 questions asking about the impact of the intervention on their work performance.

Questions were selected on the basis of their connections with engagement research as shown in the table below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strengths Engagement Index™ Item</th>
<th>Rationale</th>
<th>Research origins</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>This organisation enables me to make a meaningful and important contribution to its vision and purpose</strong></td>
<td>Connection of individual to meaning and purpose of organisation</td>
<td>Pink (Purpose) Schaufeli and Bakker (Vigour) MacLeod (narrative)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>I would recommend this organisation as a great place to work to my friends and family</strong></td>
<td>Advocacy of organisation to others</td>
<td>Say, Stay, Strive (say) Schaufeli and Bakker</td>
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### Strengths Engagement Index™ item

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<td><strong>This organisation knows how to bring out the best in me</strong></td>
<td>Extent to which organisation has built the infrastructure to understand and utilise individuals’ strengths</td>
<td>Schaufeli and Bakker (Vigour, Absorption)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>I clearly understand how to use my unique strengths to contribute to the organisation’s success</strong></td>
<td>Extent to which organisation has built the infrastructure to understand and utilise individuals’ strengths</td>
<td>Pink (Mastery) Bandura (Self-efficacy)</td>
</tr>
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<td><strong>I know where to go for help in areas where I have weaknesses or limitations</strong></td>
<td>Provision of social and technical support</td>
<td>HSE (support, relationships)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>I have regular progress reviews and know how I am performing against my goals</strong></td>
<td>Provision of feedback against goals</td>
<td>Pink (Mastery) Locke (Goal-setting) MacLeod (line managers)</td>
</tr>
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<td><strong>I regularly have opportunities to do challenging work in line with my strengths and potential</strong></td>
<td>Degree to which individual is stretched and challenged positively</td>
<td>Pink (Mastery) Schaufeli and Bakker (Dedication)</td>
</tr>
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<td><strong>My manager understands what energises me and helps me to learn and grow in areas of strength</strong></td>
<td>Extent to which organisation has built the infrastructure to understand and utilise individuals’ strengths</td>
<td>Bandura (Self-efficacy) MacLeod (line managers)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>I am encouraged to have a say in the way I perform my job</strong></td>
<td>Provision of autonomy in job role</td>
<td>Pink (Autonomy) MacLeod (employee voice)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>I am often challenged to stretch outside my comfort zone and apply my strengths in new and unfamiliar ways</strong></td>
<td>Degree to which individual is stretched and challenged positively</td>
<td>Say, Stay, Strive (strive) MacLeod (line managers) Schaufeli and Bakker (Dedication)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>I get the support I need to deal positively with work pressures and setbacks</strong></td>
<td>Provision of social and technical support</td>
<td>HSE (support, relationships)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>I feel my strengths and contribution are truly valued by the organisation</strong></td>
<td>Provision of feedback on how strengths contribute value</td>
<td>Pink (Mastery) MacLeod (organisational integrity)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>My work boosts my confidence and helps me feel good about myself</strong></td>
<td>Creating conditions for staff to experience well-being at work</td>
<td>Schaufeli and Bakker (Absorption) MacLeod (organisational integrity)</td>
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The Strengths Engagement Index™ report also provides organisations with clarity with what they can do in each area of engagement, whether they score well or poorly. Some examples are shown in the table below:

<table>
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<tr>
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<th>To increase rating...</th>
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<td><strong>This organisation enables me to make a</strong></td>
<td>Ensure a clear cascade of the organisation’s vision, values and goals to...</td>
</tr>
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</table>
meaningful and important contribution to its vision and purpose | ensure clarity and a sense of purpose. Communicate this in different ways and repeatedly.
---|---
I regularly have opportunities to do challenging work in line with my strengths and potential | Focus 80% of development time and budget on helping good contributors to develop skills, experience and knowledge in areas of greatest strength. The remaining 20% should be spent on managing and mitigating weaker areas and overdone strengths.
I get the support I need to deal positively with work pressures and setbacks | Promote peer coaching, networking and mentoring programmes to provide support and challenge for learning and innovation. Tolerate reasonable mistakes and treat them as valuable learning opportunities.

An example of the type of ‘return on investment data generated by Strengths Engagement Index is shown below:

As a result of strengths interventions using Strengthscope, employees* reported the following:
- 79% had improved confidence in their strengths and how they could best contribute at work
- 66% had improved their contribution in areas they were naturally drawn to
- 77% were able to keep their strengths in good balance, ensuring that they were not underused or overused
- 66% had been able to remove or reduce limiting weaknesses by capitalising on their strengths
- 73% had improved their overall work performance and results.
- As a result, engagement levels increased an average of 12% over a median elapsed time of 6 months.

* Sample of 121 people, drawn from US, Europe, Africa, Asia. Sectors included pharmaceuticals, not for profit, manufacturing, consulting and retail.

Strengths Engagement Index™ is available to every accredited user of Strengthscope®. Please contact the Strengths Partnership/Strengthscope® representative in your area for more information on using Strengths Engagement Index™.
3. References


