Successful employee engagement: how to attract and retain the best talent

Employee engagement is one of those often talked about but rarely understood concepts. Every employer knows that a happy and fulfilled employee is a more productive one, but to attract and retain the best talent for a business involves engaging employees in the long term.

Engagement is about respect going up, down and across a business, transparency throughout and alignment of HR and management policies to business culture and objectives. When all this is done well, employees will be doing the right job for all the right reasons, and the business benefits will be tangible.

Benefits of employee engagement

One of the most obvious business benefits of engaging employees includes a reduction in employee turnover. This instantly reduces costs associated with recruitment and training, and also encourages stability. That in itself will deliver benefits within a team, in terms of spreading feelings of engagement and team loyalty and values.

In addition to internal engagement levels with other employees, this stability is also positive in terms of customer and partner relations. An engaged employee will be better able to establish a good working rapport and sell the benefits of their company or what it offers, therefore having a positive impact on the bottom line.

A further benefit lies with the business brand; the lower the attrition rate and the longer the standard employee tenure with a company, the better its reputation as a place to work and so the more likely it is that such a business will attract the strongest talent.

Engagement through recruitment

A strong business brand that is consistently attractive to job-hunters is fundamental to enticing candidates to look at your careers website and apply for roles. Consequently, HR departments must engage with marketing and communications departments in order to present an integrated strategy – particularly important during the actual recruitment process.

One way in which to attract the strongest candidates is to have a strong and consistently branded online recruitment process, with the ability to respond to candidates quickly and with useful feedback.

For businesses, ensuring a well-integrated and smooth online recruitment process, as part of ongoing candidate management, is also important for ongoing talent management. For example, records can be kept of those candidates who might not be suitable for the current role on offer, but who could be revisited as and when a better role for them arises.

Being able to attract the best talent is essential for all organizations, so it is
advantageous to be able to identify it as early as possible.

Candidate engagement at “3”

The UK mobile network, 3, decided to move all its recruitment online, because it wanted to ensure that candidates would have a consistent and positive experience of the company. In doing this, 3 hoped to make the process not only easier and more transparent for the candidates, but also more efficient for managers coping with large volumes of applications and interviews.

Historically, 3 had used an admin-heavy combination of Microsoft Excel spreadsheets and Outlook to manage its recruitment campaigns, which was inconsistent with an ad hoc reporting system. In 2002, 3 put in place a solution with five different online recruitment gateways, each aimed at recruiting for different parts of the business. Simultaneously, 3 redesigned its careers website in order to make it as simple as possible to apply for a job. In 2006, 3 revisited its processes to ensure that it was working with the best solution possible, and could work towards maintaining standards in the future.

The ability to contact candidates promptly and professionally is a differentiator for 3 in a highly competitive market, helping it to attract and engage top talent. It also improves the employer brand through offering candidates the ability to track their application status at every stage of the process. The implemented software solution has allowed the HR team to save valuable time by simultaneously posting jobs to multiple channels. As a result, 3 has significantly lowered its reliance on external recruitment agencies, saving on average £1,760 per hire as a result.

Engaging and appraising at each stage

Once talented candidates have been identified and successfully hired to join the business, the engagement process begins in earnest. Adding to the records started over the recruitment process, personnel files can be built up to help businesses truly understand where the talent and assets lie in a business. Well-kept records help to understand where strengths and weaknesses of an individual lie, so helping to inform training, management and internal mobility and succession planning strategies. Without identifying the characteristics of employees, it can prove very difficult for businesses to truly engage their workforce.

Businesses should hold regular appraisals with employees to demonstrate that communication channels are well established and always open. A coordinated performance management process should not be treated as an administrative burden, but instead a way to gauge opinions and feelings of employees and to offer valuable feedback. All businesses need visibility of their employees' performance, be that on a single-office or global scale, as such insights can help with the identification of skills gaps and succession planning.

The more employees feel that they are valued and see that their employers are helping them work towards their personal career goals, the more loyal to and engaged with a business they will be.

Improved appraisal process at Rabobank International

Rabobank International is the international operation of the Rabobank Group, a financial services provider. With over 340 offices in over 40 countries worldwide and after experiencing rapid growth, Rabobank was finding it very difficult to consistently manage the performance of its employees to the same standard globally.

To overcome the inefficiencies and inconsistencies of the appraisals programme,
Rabobank needed a solution that would allow employees and managers alike to keep a record of their achievements, ongoing development initiatives and objectives.

In 2005, the bank implemented a single paperless system that could be used across the business to support its global performance initiative. The entire employee appraisal process is now managed online, vastly reducing the amount of time HR spends paper chasing, as automated reminders, status reports and process escalation all help to drive task efficiency and completion in line with company objectives.

As a result of the solution implementation, not only was Rabobank able to ensure all regions were compliant with its appraisals processes, but it was able to achieve its performance management goals of increasing global transparency and appraisal completion rates.

**Engagement through networking**

In addition to holding regular appraisals with employees, there are other ways in which to engage the workforce and listen to their opinions and ideas. One of the best methods is to take advantage of the tools that many organizations currently block their employees from accessing – social networks.

By creating an internal social network and replicating experiences available on the internet on a company intranet, businesses will find that they are providing employees with a place in which colleagues can share knowledge, interests and experience right across the company.

Internal networks can help to engage employees in many ways, not least in just feeling part of a workforce community. Having buy-in from senior executives can also make employees feel that they are valued and that their voices are heard right at the top of the company.

**Engagement through reward**

While keeping a workforce happy with well-matched work, excellent career prospects and a loyalty to your company brand, another way to engage them is through reward schemes. The recession has encouraged much negative press around bonuses and incentive schemes, but this should lead to a valuable increase in transparency between performance and rewards.

The first step should be to implement a well-recorded and consistent performance management scheme, so that rewards can be clearly linked to performance. Such linked incentive schemes can enhance employee productivity and engagement, as well as help encourage loyalty from the workforce, as they feel that good work really does pay off.

**Focusing on people not process**

Engagement is vital from start to finish, and done properly, systematically and in an integrated way, your business will thrive. Done badly, you will not only find your business spends unnecessary amounts of money on recruitment and training, but you will also find that essential talent will not be drawn to your company in the first place. Follow this route to its logical conclusion and your business will suffer through bad working relationships with customers and partners, resulting in lost revenues.

But this need not be the case. If businesses listen, and think about making it as easy as possible for employees – from the candidate stage to the alumnus stage – to work with them and get what they want and need, they will engage them and breed loyalty.
By using technology to help regulate and integrate HR and management systems with other parts of the business and putting the focus back on the people rather than the process, you might find yourself attracting and retaining all the best talent and saving yourself money at the same time.

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