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A Profile of Project Manager Work Engagement: A Field Survey

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ABSTRACT

Engaged employees are those who are involved in, enthusiastic about, and committed to their work and who are most likely to drive innovation, generate new ideas, have a sense of connection with their work activities, and are involved with the demands of their job (Gallup, 2013). Nowhere is the concept of employee engagement more important than with managing an organization's projects. Ensuring a project manager is emotionally engaged with his or her work is crucial for project success to meet greater challenges in today's 21st-century global marketplace. In this research study, project managers were asked to respond to an employee engagement survey to ascertain whether project manager work engagement levels are significantly different than the employee work engagement levels of the general population.

INTRODUCTION

For an organization to accomplish its mission and goals most effectively and efficiently, it must have fully engaged employees to meet the ever-changing global demands of the 21st century (Towers Watson, 2012). The concept of employee engagement can be traced back to Kahn (1990), who suggested that for individuals to be fully engaged with their work, they must be able to engage themselves cognitively, emotionally, and physically. Overlapping conceptually with Kahn's work on employee engagement, Gallup (2013) defined engaged employees as those who are involved in, enthusiastic about, and committed to their work and who are most likely to drive innovation, generate new ideas, have a sense of connection with their work activities, and are involved with the demands of their job. SHRM, (2012) defines employee engagement as "feelings of urgency, focus, enthusiasm and intensity. It is the energized feeling that an employee has about work and is about the employee's connection and commitment to the organization."

Others have defined engaged employees as those who are eager to start each workday fully involved, physically energized, emotionally connected, mentally focused, and enthusiastic about their contribution and workplace environment (Fleming, 2009). Still others say employees engaged in with their work possess a strong drive to consistently contribute to the success of the organization's mission and give their best effort because they love their work and the organization to which they belong. Moreover, employee work engagement has been shown to be correlated to positive employee attitudes, feeling energetic and enthusiastic, having proactive job behaviors, and increased individual job and organizational performance (Bakker, Shaufeli, Leiter, & Taris, 2008). Common elements among all these definitions are engaged employees being fully committed to their work and role with the organization; enjoying and believing in their work; exerting extra effort to contribute to organization's success; taking

pride in their work and their organization; understanding the link between their job and the organization's mission; and feeling valued by their employer (SHRM, 2012).

Disappointingly, Gallup (2013) reports that only one in eight workers worldwide, 13%, are engaged at work. United States and Canada lead the way with 29% percent of the work force being engaged at work. Conversely, 63% of the worldwide workers are disengaged with their work and another 24% are actively disengaged with their work. Towers Watson (2012) reports that nearly two thirds of respondents in their global employee engagement survey reported low work engagement. SHRM (2012) reports that on average, employees were only moderately engaged with their work, and that employee engagement has not changed in the two years that SHRM have been collecting employee engagement survey data. Gallup (2013) adds that disengaged employees are not likely to be hostile or disruptive in the organization; however, they show up to work doing the minimum required work, may waste valuable time, and do little or take no interest in the organization's mission and goals. Thus, these employees are sleepwalking through their workday, putting time – but not energy or passion – into their work.

Additionally, "Low engagement and job satisfaction can contribute to multiple organizational problems and have been associated with increased levels of turnover and absenteeism" (SRIM, 2012). Furthermore, "people who aren't engaged spend much more time experiencing emotions like worry, stress, and pain" (Gavett & Berinato, 2013). Not surprisingly, disengaged employees may include organizational managers that actually can be miserable with their job and therefore a liability for the organization (Clifton, 2011).

A workplace of disengaged employees creates not only excessive employee turnover but also havoc, wasted effort and talent, loss of commitment, and financial loss that can lead to the devastation of the organization (Blessing White, 2013). LSA Global (2009) a global training and consulting firm that focuses on achieving measurable business results, conducted research on employee engagement. The researchers found that a lack of employee engagement adversely affects a company's overall financial performance. Even worse are the "actively" disengaged workers that are defined as being negative and potentially hostile to their organizations (Weber, 2013). These employees are not only personally disengaged with their work, but they tend to encourage others to be disengaged, both with their individual work and the organization's overall mission and goals (Clifton, 2011).

Consequently, increasing employee engagement within the workforce is a critical factor influencing company profitability (SHRM, 2012). A Blessing White study (2013) showed that the top drivers of employee engagement include "clarity on the organization's priorities getting feedback, having the opportunities to use their skills, and career development." Additionally, SHRM (2012) indicates that there are certain conditions under which employee engagement is much more likely to occur such as needing reasons to engage with work and the feeling that they are free to engage with their work. On the other hand, leading by intimidation only causes fear and limits employee engagement, forcing the worker to withdraw from informal networks gradually, and can ultimately lead to disengagement or burnout in which the employee essentially becomes more concerned about his or her welfare rather than the goals of the organization (Ehin, 2010).

A study conducted by Watson Wyatt Worldwide (2008/09) on HR practices of 50 large U.S. firms revealed that high-performing organizations focus on engaging their top-performing employees. According to the findings of that research, high-performing firms do is what top-performing employees ask for, thereby reducing the turnover of high-performing employees and, as a result leading to top business performance engagement. In addition, this study found that companies with highly engaged employees, dedicated time to preparing them for their new jobs. Further research has shown that high

employee engagement can lead to innovation, increased production, higher-quality products or service, less waste, customer satisfaction, and greater profits (Fleming, 2009). Additionally, SHRM (2012) denotes that “When employees find their work to be meaningful and fulfilling, they are more likely to be satisfied, engaged and do their work well.” Therefore, it is crucial for organization leaders to understand the factors that prompt employees to be emotionally engaged with their work (Gallup, 2013). One of those factors is the work itself. SHRM (2012) goes on to say that “The work itself means how interesting, challenging or exciting an employee’s job is. It can be difficult for employees to remain motivated, satisfied and engaged with their jobs if the work is not stimulating.” An engaged employee workforce leads to higher levels of performance, reduced intent to quit, raised levels of personal well-being, and adaptation to the ever-changing market (Alfes, Truss, Soane, Rees, & Gatenby, 2010). Therefore, an organization will not only capitalize on all talents and energy of its workforce, but it will allow for a greater focus on employee satisfaction, and profitability (Daft, 2011). Moreover, “as the job market expands, it will be particularly important for HR professionals to pay close attention to aspects that are engaging their workforce” (SHRM, 2012).

RESEARCH AND HYPOTHESIS

We began our consideration of project manager work engagement with the research question, “Are project managers engaged in their work?” We initially accepted the premise that nowhere is the concept of employee engagement more important than with managing an organization’s projects. When it comes to an organization’s projects, success is measured by effectively meeting the triple constraints: complete the project on time, according to budget, and within scope and quality requirements of the clients (PMI, 2013). On the surface, this approach seems to concentrate solely on technical aspects of project management. However, project managers must provide essential leadership for the project team members to be emotionally engaged to achieve the project’s objective of time, scope, cost, and quality objectives (Hardy-Vallee, 2012). Consequently, the success of an organization’s projects relies critically on the effectiveness organization’s leadership team to build a workforce of engaged employees (Thomas & Bendoly, 2009). As a result, building a workplace culture of engaged project managers will favorably impact the achievement of the organization’s mission, goals, overall performance, and its bottom line profits (Kalinowski, 2009).

The research question is evaluated by determining if the project managers who took the survey answered in a way that is consistent with a high level of agreement with the SHRM survey questions. The first step in this evaluation requires that it be determined if the survey respondents answered question in a significantly different manner than indicated by the calculated chi square expected value. The hypotheses are therefore given as follows:

Hypothesis:

H₀: There is no significant difference between the project manager level of agreement responses to the SHRM Work Engagement Survey questions and the overall expected value of responses.

H_a: There is a significant difference between the project manager level of agreement responses to the SHRM Work Engagement Survey questions and the overall expected value of responses.

Method and Data

The purpose of this quantitative study was to examine project manager work engagement. It is thought that understanding project manager work engagement will be valuable to an organization's leadership when establishing a work environment for successful project completion. A web survey was used to obtain the research data because it allowed the researchers to obtain large amounts of data. Additionally, a web survey allowed data to be collected, coded and downloaded into statistical software to perform calculations (Witt, 1998). After consideration of the above noted benefits and potential limitations of utilizing a web survey for the proposed study, the researchers believe there are sufficient controls in place to negate any potential limitations and will elect to employ a web-based format survey instrument.

Data Collection

The instrument utilized in this survey was the Survey Monkey Society of Human Resource Management Foundation Employee Engagement Survey (Survey Monkey, 2013). The survey is designed to measure the key concepts of employee work engagement and allowed us to examine levels of project manager work engagement. The survey consisted of twelve employee engagement questions using a Likert scale of Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Slightly Disagree, Neither Agree nor Disagree, Agree, and Strongly Agree. None of the survey items was collapsed because collapsing categories may lose information (Cozby, 2009). The length of the survey was conducive to a simple and quick completion by the participants (Survey Monkey, 2013). Cronbach's alpha for the survey was evaluated at .709 thereby providing support for internal consistency and overall validity of the survey instrument.

Analysis and Results

The SHRM/Survey Monkey work engagement survey link was posted in project manager forums in the LinkedIn professional networking site, and project managers were invited to take the work engagement survey. A total of 91 responses were received. The survey responses were collected and overall totals as well as totals for each response were collected. The responses to each question are given below in Table 1.

Table 1: Work Engagement Questions Responses

	Work Engagement Questions	SD	D	NANDA	A	SA	Total
1	Employees in my organization willingly accept change	1	33	22	28	7	91
2	Employees here are willing to take on new tasks as needed.	1	11	20	45	13	90
3	Employees in my organization take the initiative to help other employees when the need arises.	0	9	14	54	14	91
4	Employees proactively identify future challenges and opportunities.	1	18	30	33	8	90
5	Employees here always keep going when the going gets tough.	1	7	21	53	9	91
6	In my organization, employees adapt quickly to difficult situations.	1	15	28	42	5	91
7	I am determined to give my best effort at work each day.	4	10	15	42	20	91
8	I am often so involved in my work that the day goes by very quickly.	0	1	3	49	38	91
9	I am often so involved in my work that the day goes by very quickly.	0	8	12	36	35	91
10	I get excited about going to work.	2	16	22	38	11	89
11	I feel completely involved in my work.	0	7	15	54	15	91
12	I am inspired to meet my goals at work.	0	7	15	39	30	91
Totals		11	142	217	513	205	

The chi square test was selected to determine if the surveyed project managers responded in a way that was significantly different from the chi square calculated expected value of responses. The chi square expected value is given by the formula (Row Total x Column Total)/Overall Total). The chi square expected values are provided as follows in Table 2.

Table 2: Work Engagement Questions chi square Expected Values

	Work Engagement Questions	SD	D	NANDA	A	SA	Total
1	Employees in my organization willingly accept change	0.92	11.88	18.15	42.91	17.15	91.00
2	Employees here are willing to take on new tasks as needed.	0.91	11.75	17.95	42.44	16.96	90.00
3	Employees in my organization take the initiative to help other employees when the need arises.	0.92	11.88	18.15	42.91	17.15	91.00
4	Employees proactively identify future challenges and opportunities.	0.91	11.75	17.95	42.44	16.96	90.00
5	Employees here always keep going when the going gets tough.	0.92	11.88	18.15	42.91	17.15	91.00
6	In my organization, employees adapt quickly to difficult situations.	0.92	11.88	18.15	42.91	17.15	91.00
7	I am determined to give my best effort at work each day.	0.92	11.88	18.15	42.91	17.15	91.00
8	I am often so involved in my work that the day goes by very quickly.	0.92	11.88	18.15	42.91	17.15	91.00
9	I am often so involved in my work that the day goes by very quickly.	0.92	11.88	18.15	42.91	17.15	91.00
10	I get excited about going to work.	0.90	11.62	17.75	41.96	16.77	89.00
11	I feel completely involved in my work.	0.92	11.88	18.15	42.91	17.15	91.00
12	I am inspired to meet my goals at work.	0.92	11.88	18.15	42.91	17.15	91.00
Totals		11.00	142.00	217.00	513.00	205.00	1088.00

The chi square values are developed by the formula (Observed value-Expected value)²/Expected Value)). The chi square values are presented in Table 3.

Table 3: Chi-square values

	Work Engagement Questions	SD	D	NANDA	A	SA	Total
1	Employees in my organization willingly accept change	0.01	37.57	0.82	5.18	6.00	49.57
2	Employees here are willing to take on new tasks as needed.	0.01	0.05	0.23	0.15	0.92	1.37
3	Employees in my organization take the initiative to help other employees when the need arises.	0.92	0.70	0.95	2.87	0.58	6.01
4	Employees proactively identify future challenges and opportunities.	0.01	3.33	8.09	2.10	4.73	18.26
5	Employees here always keep going when the going gets tough.	0.01	2.00	0.45	2.37	3.87	8.70
6	In my organization, employees adapt quickly to difficult situations.	0.01	0.82	5.35	0.02	8.60	14.80
7	I am determined to give my best effort at work each day.	10.31	0.30	0.55	0.02	0.48	11.65
8	I am often so involved in my work that the day goes by very quickly.	0.92	9.96	12.65	0.87	25.36	49.76
9	I am often so involved in my work that the day goes by very quickly.	0.92	1.27	2.08	1.11	18.59	23.97
10	I get excited about going to work.	1.35	1.65	1.02	0.37	1.98	6.38
11	I feel completely involved in my work.	0.92	2.00	0.55	2.87	0.27	6.61
12	I am inspired to meet my goals at work.	0.92	2.00	0.55	0.36	9.64	13.46
Totals		16.29	61.65	33.27	18.29	81.03	210.53

The chi square statistic produced by the analysis is 210.53 with 44 degrees of freedom. The chi square critical value at .05 is 60.48. This value is significantly greater than the critical value. For the null hypothesis to be accepted the chi square value must be below the critical value indicating that the means of the observed and expected values are drawn from the same distribution. Since the test statistic is above the critical value, the null hypothesis is rejected, and the alternative hypothesis is accepted.

Although the responses are significantly different from the chi square calculated expected values, the question remains, “In what way are the responses different?” Figure 1 illustrates that the difference is easily explained by the high level of agreement by project managers with the SHRM survey questions.

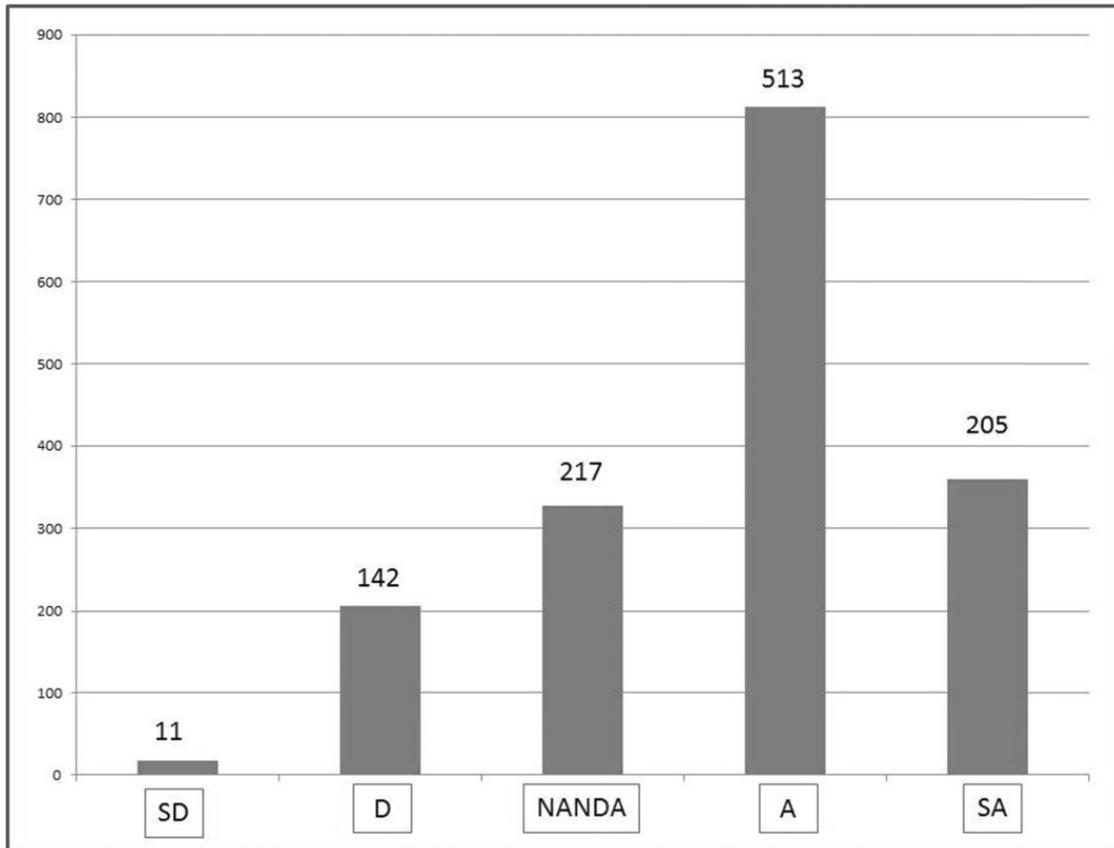


Figure 1: Summary of responses indicating a high level of agreement

DISCUSSION

As indicated earlier in this research paper, SHRM (2012) defined employee engagement as feelings of urgency, focus, enthusiasm and intensity. It is the energized feeling that an employee has about work. This present study’s findings using the SHRM (2012) employee engagement survey indicated that many project managers were feeling the urgency and intensity in their work. This finding is supported by the chi square test of significance of the difference in observed versus calculated expected value in survey responses. It is further reinforced by descriptive statistics that highlight the overwhelming level of agreement with the SHRM Work Engagement survey questions.

In the Gallup (2012) survey and the Towers Watson surveys (2012) results, nearly two thirds of respondents in the global survey reported low work engagement. However, in the SHRM/Survey Monkey survey (2013) a much different picture emerges. From the evidence derived from the SHRM/Survey Monkey (2013) survey results and compared with previous similar surveys, the evidence suggests that project managers, unlike respondents to surveys administered to the general population, are highly engaged in their work.

SUMMARY

The specific problem addressed in this present study is that the level of work engagement of project managers was not known. Without this information, stakeholders, such as organizational leaders may not have all the information they need to maximize project manager work engagement, thereby maximizing a work environment that enhances project success.

An essential task for an organization in the 21st century is to create an engaged workforce (Towers Watson, 2012). According to SHRM (2012), “Fostering a more engaged workforce will help your organization achieve its mission, execute its strategy and generate positive business results.” The present study provides new information about which organizational leadership may want to use extend their understanding of project management engagement and its potential usefulness. Ideally, the results of this present study will assist organizational leadership to take a positive approach to stimulating project manager work engagement to meet the organization’s mission, strategy, goals, and objectives.

Employee engagement has been shown to be correlated with many positive outcomes, including inspiring and stimulating employees to achieve extraordinary performance in accomplishing the organization’s mission (Alfes et al., 2010). It is with hopefulness that our research demonstrates the importance of examining project manager work engagement, and we have expanded the current body of knowledge on project management work engagement. An additional objective was to show that organizations can greatly benefit from having fully engaged project managers to meet mission, goals, and project success when organizational leadership supports a work environment culture that enhances project manager work engagement. This environment can then inspire and stimulate project managers, resulting in extraordinary performance in accomplishing project success and fulfilling responsibilities to all stakeholders. Plus, fully emotionally engaged project managers also are in a position to have a positive influence on project team members, therefore encouraging them to be fully engaged with their work and the project.

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