

career engagement: bridging career counseling and employee engagement

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A model of career engagement is presented to help bridge the gap between career counselors' focus on supporting individuals to find meaningful work and employers' desire for an engaged, productive, and committed workforce.



Although a primary role of career and employment counselors continues to be supporting unemployed clients, clients increasingly also include the underemployed (e.g., those working fewer than ideal hours or in positions for which they are overqualified; McKee-Ryan & Harvey, 2011). At the same time, employers are concerned with employee engagement and its link to productivity and positive business returns (Attridge, 2009). The goals of employment counselors and employers are similar—effective use of talent and skills to ensure the best person–job fit.

In the sections that follow, we briefly review highlights of the employee engagement literature, introduce the Career Engagement model, and then discuss how the model can be used by career or employment counselors and employers to strategically enhance employee engagement through supporting career development.

EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT

Employee engagement is a popular topic among employers; the term is used to refer to the results of the emotional and intellectual connection employees have for their employers (Gibbons, 2006). High levels of engagement have been linked to increased productivity, benefiting employers, and job satisfaction, benefiting employees (Hay Group, 2001).

Several themes have emerged from the engagement literature, including commitment (e.g., intent to stay), attachment (e.g., relationships with coworkers and/or managers, rewards and recognition), and contribution (e.g., willingness to go “above and beyond”). What is not specifically addressed in the engagement literature, but identified throughout the career development literature, is the importance of aligning personal and organizational values (Amundson, 1989; Brown, 2002; Hirsch, Jackson, & Kidd, 2001; Sharf, 2002). Integrating the employee engagement and career development literature, we have developed a model of employee engagement that comprises four components: alignment, commitment, contribution, and appreciation.

CAREER ENGAGEMENT

Career and employment counselors are also interested in engagement as they strive to help individuals find meaningful work in which they can fully use their skills. We developed the Career Engagement model to illustrate the dynamic interaction between capacity and challenge that is required to keep individuals fully engaged in their work. The model has been informed by Csikszentmihalyi's (1997) work on flow or optimal experience (i.e., matching skills to level of challenge), Vygotsky's (1978) work on the Zone of Proximal



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Development (i.e., acknowledging that learning and skill development is ongoing), as well as our own work using career management as an employee engagement strategy (Neault & Pickerell, 2006).

The model outlines the relationship between *capacity* (i.e., an individual's skills and attributes, availability of organizational resources, or access to appropriate supports) and *challenge* (i.e., the level of difficulty or complexity of a specific activity, given the individual's current capacity to do the task). These two constructs form the *x*- and *y*-axes of the graphic used to illustrate the model (see <http://ccpacdchapter.blogspot.com/2011/05/career-engagement-new-model.html>). The center of the model (i.e., where capacity and challenge are comfortably balanced) is where an individual is successfully *engaged*. Influenced by Vygotsky's (1978) work, a dotted line within the zone indicates that the balance is rarely perfect (i.e., sometimes there will be a slightly more than ideal challenge, sometimes less). In the full color version of the model, the engaged zone is green, indicating that it is a positive place to be.

Viewed moving out from the engaged zone in both directions, the figure depicts the colors of a traffic light: the color gradually shifts from green, to yellow/orange, and then to red. We have labeled the orange zone at the bottom right of the model (i.e., high capacity, low skills) as *underutilized*. This is the zone that many highly skilled professional immigrants, for example, find themselves in when they are unable to reenter their preimmigration occupations.

The orange zone at the top left of the model is labeled *overwhelmed*. Individuals in this zone find themselves with insufficient capacity (whether individual skills and attributes or organizational resources) to successfully navigate the challenges that they encounter. Such individuals, if the imbalance is not successfully resolved, may find that they are less productive, are no longer able to juggle multiple tasks or complete all the work that is required, and are at risk of stress-related illnesses and burnout.

As the orange zones become red, both the top left and bottom right corners of the model are labeled *disengaged*. At this point, because individuals are far removed from a place of engagement, it may take significant interventions to return them to a place of career success and job satisfaction.

Counselors and employers can use the Career Engagement model to identify how individuals became disengaged (i.e., through being overwhelmed or underutilized) in order to properly plan interventions; an exciting new opportunity will not reengage the overwhelmed but might work for someone who is underutilized.

CAREER ENGAGEMENT AS AN EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT STRATEGY

As we have introduced the Career Engagement model to individual clients and organizational leaders, it has resonated with both groups; it may, therefore, serve as a bridge between career counseling and employee engagement interventions. To support career engagement, counselors can help individuals find and maintain work that uses their skills, talents, and attributes. Counselors can also advocate for lifelong career management by keeping challenge and capacity in a reasonable balance through taking on special projects or new positions to stay challenged, engaging in continuing education, or developing an effective support system. Similarly, career counselors can help employers support career engagement through special projects; cross training; transferring employees into different positions; or, in some cases, facilitating a gracious exit from the organization. Through use of this model, both career counselors and employers can support individuals to make the necessary career adjustments to stay fully engaged.

In our Employee Engagement model, we have identified four major components of engagement: alignment, commitment, contribution, and appreciation. Each of these can influence career engagement.

Alignment

Within the Employee Engagement model, alignment refers to the fit between individual and organizational values. As a way to assess this fit, interventions such as culture audits, career values assessments, or coaching conversations about career and organizational values can be helpful. Within the Career Engagement model, on the other hand, alignment of capacity with challenge is important.

Commitment

In employee engagement terms, commitment relates to loyalty and intent to stay with the organization. Career conversations, either with a counselor or supervisor/manager, can help individuals identify long-term career goals and whether opportunities to successfully achieve those goals exist within the organization. Employee loyalty in today's workplace tends to be more closely linked to relationships with supervisors and coworkers than to the organization as a whole (Keller Johnson, 2005). Without the presence of positive relationships, an organization risks losing employees, regardless of the opportunity, pay, or benefits.

Contribution

Within models of employee engagement, contribution relates to the level of discretionary effort employees are willing to make (i.e., going above and beyond). Career counselors can help clients identify appropriately challenging roles and recognize the value of doing more than is required to contribute to their own sense of engagement; a strong person–job fit tends to inspire discretionary effort.

Appreciation

Fully engaged employees typically know that their work is valued and that their effort to support the organization's goals is appreciated. Career counselors can help individuals celebrate their accomplishments, value their own contributions, and recognize when their work is being appreciated. Employers may need support in developing effective reward and recognition initiatives, recognizing that showing appreciation goes beyond salary increases or bonuses.

SUMMARY AND NEXT STEPS

Employment counselors can help individuals maximize their career engagement at any career stage. Facilitating career engagement, as illustrated in this brief article, can contribute to the employee engagement that employers are looking for. As our research continues, we also encourage others to use the Career Engagement and Employee Engagement models as vehicles to bridge employers' interest in engagement and counselors' interest in supporting the career development of individual clients.

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