AMA MEMBER SURVEY

Ensuring Engagement and Satisfaction at All Levels:
CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

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American Management Association

Scope of Research
Satisfaction does not always result in engagement

With an eye toward employee retention and recruiting top talent, organizations have measured employee satisfaction for a number of years. Satisfaction is usually synonymous with happiness, and many professionals have believed that happy employees become long-term employees. While a correlation between employee satisfaction and long-term commitment exists, satisfied employees are not necessarily engaged employees. Engagement is synonymous with diligence, or willingness to expend effort. Engaged employees show initiative, are self-sufficient problem-solvers, and work to achieve goals. In other words, employees may be satisfied with their jobs, but satisfaction does not guarantee that employees function at the highest levels, which best serves their organizations.

Therefore, organizations have realized they need employees who are both satisfied and engaged. Researchers have identified aspects of employees' experience that, when measured, indicated both employees' level of engagement and satisfaction. These aspects are: 1) employees' relationships with their immediate supervisors; 2) employees' sense of autonomy; 3) employees' opportunities to use their skills and abilities to their fullest extent.

In April 2019, AMA conducted a survey of 521 of its members. The survey's 12 items asked members about these three aspects of their experience. Respondents come from a broad spectrum of industries, ranging from biotechnology and law to mining and manufacturing. Forty-nine percent of those surveyed have worked for the same organization for over 10 years, while another 12% have worked for their organizations for at least seven years. Sixty-four percent of respondents are women, 33% are men, and 3% chose not to indicate a gender.

Key Finding #1
Of respondents reporting potential disengagement and dissatisfaction, more than 25% are well-compensated senior leaders.

26%

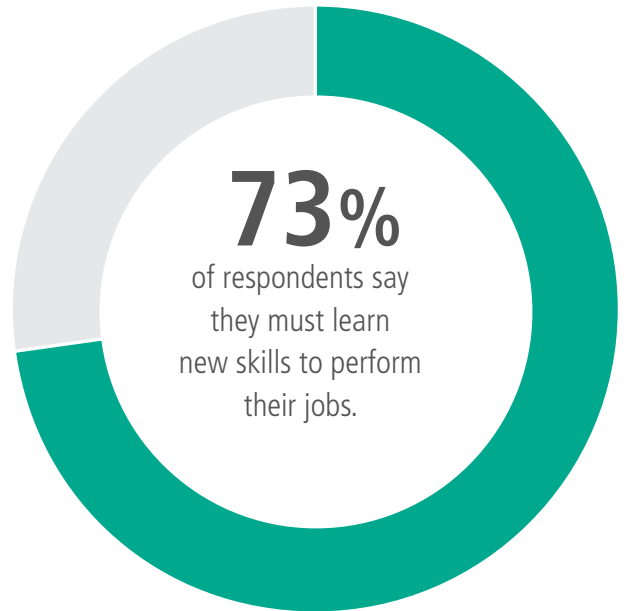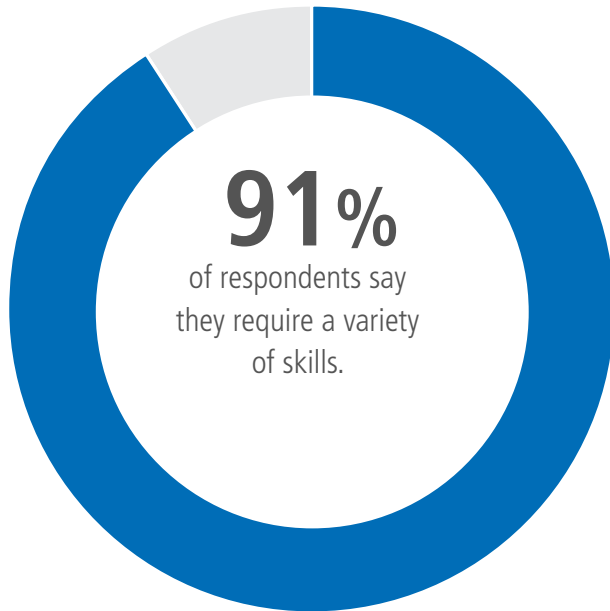of respondents reporting potential disengagement and dissatisfaction are managers and senior leaders.

Four survey items asked respondents about their relationships with their immediate supervisors. Sixteen percent of respondents indicated that they have poor relationships with their immediate supervisors. These respondents indicated that their supervisors do not give them what they need, including proper direction, to ensure their best efforts. They indicated that their supervisors don't understand how they take in and process information and don't effectively delegate authority or give the appropriate latitude to solve problems on their own.

On the surface, it may not seem that 16% of respondents is a significant amount. Likewise, superficially, it may seem probable that these respondents are entry-level individual contributors who are not well compensated. In contrast to these assumptions, only 5% of these respondents are new managers, while 26% are experienced managers and senior leaders. Moreover, 80% of these respondents are 40-69 years old, and 60% of these respondents earn from $100,000 to over $200,000 annually. In other words, of the respondents potentially disengaged from their work and dissatisfied with their jobs, more than a quarter are experienced professionals and more than half are in upper-income brackets. This should be a red flag for organizations. Disengagement at a senior level can have even more significant implications than disengagement among individual contributors.

Key Finding #2
A large majority of respondents report that their work requires a variety of skills and demands constant development of new skills.

91%
of respondents say
they require a variety
of skills.

73%
of respondents say
they must learn
new skills to perform
their jobs.

Four survey items asked participants about the skills they use to do their jobs. A large majority, 91%, either agree or strongly agree that the tasks they perform require a variety of skills (4.2% were neutral). Likewise, 73% either agree or strongly agree that their work tasks require them to learn new skills, which they find valuable (15.8% were neutral). These statistics suggest that survey respondents experience a strong sense of autonomy as they work and that they enjoy a number of regular opportunities to use skills and gain new skills they value. Both of these types of experiences facilitate engagement and satisfaction (and, consequently, retention: as noted above, 49% of survey takers have worked for their current organizations 10 or more years). Thus, the minority of respondents reporting experiences that can hinder engagement and satisfaction is counterbalanced by a majority who report other types of experiences that can promote and sustain engagement and satisfaction.

Business Implications of the Key Findings

Organizations need all employees, at all levels, to be both engaged and satisfied with their jobs, in order to achieve efficiency, employee retention and profit maximization. Thus, while it is reassuring to see that a large proportion of respondents experience the autonomy and opportunity for skill development associated with engagement and satisfaction, it is disconcerting to know that 1/8 of respondents, at all levels of their organizations, report experiences that undermine these.

In other words, organizations seem to be successfully attending to key intrinsic employee motivators—autonomy and opportunity for skill development—but they need to be more attentive to all types of direct-report/manager relationships (whether supervisor to front-line worker or vice president to director). The possibility that more than 25% of well-compensated, experienced senior leaders could be disengaged and dissatisfied is potentially too costly for any organization to ignore. Organizations should bear in mind the value of management and leadership skills training, even at senior levels, where, at first glance, such training may seem unnecessary or optional.

Likewise, having such large majorities of respondents report the necessities of honing their skills and obtaining new skills suggests that on-going training in multiple areas, beyond management skills—such as critical thinking, financial acumen or data analysis—is essential for developing and sustaining high levels of employee engagement and satisfaction.

Author

Haywood Spangler, PhD, MDiv, is the founder and principal of Work & Think LLC. He is a corporate consultant, researcher and author. He formerly interned as a biomedical ethicist at the University of Virginia Medical Center and was an instructor of business ethics at the University of Virginia McIntire School of Commerce. His Spangler Ethical Reasoning Assessment® (SERA®) is used across industries and around the world, enabling individuals to combine critical thinking and values to make complex decisions.

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