

An open source of engagement

Tim Marshall discusses how an old concept of staff engagement could be revitalised to improve motivation, attachment and enthusiasm

I imagine the scene: a disenfranchised young person drifting through school into college; he's not achieving, disruptive and verbally aggressive. Another argument with his least favourite teacher sees him explode with anger as he kicks chairs across the floor. This could be a pivotal moment in that student's life and one that can lead to many paths.

The canny teacher however, rather than confront or completely avoid the situation, delays until the opportunity arises to give that student some responsibility for a class project, something he knows will spark his imagination and generate an attachment to his fellow students through their combined effort. From this point on, the student grows and his latent potential is realised, projecting him in his studies beyond his peers with high levels of performance and a desire to learn and develop.

We all have stories of teachers we remember, who inspired us to pursue an interest; in my case, I didn't even like mine. This is a good example

of engagement, and relates to the hot topic of employee engagement. It's not about making things good for people so they'll stay, it's about creating a place in the world where an individual's contribution is valued, where he can shake off the confines of role-orientation and demonstrate that he has other qualities to share.

Open-source sessions

The Holy Grail of an organisation is a highly motivated and productive workforce and yet BlessingWhite, in its *Employee Engagement Report* (Dec 2010)¹, indicates that only 31 per cent of employees are actively engaged in their jobs. As such, organisations are investing more in developing strategy, policies and tools to raise employee engagement and realise their potential. However, industry may have missed a trick by not redeveloping what some might say is a tired and redundant format in the 'working lunch'.

We are not talking about the 'sitting at your desk, eating a sandwich while trying to tap out a few emails' lunch. Nor the contrived director forum, where stunned service representatives try to understand the strategic application of combined ratios over a crab sandwich. This is the 'open-source session' – an ever-changing, free and open opportunity for anyone in the business to participate in learning, action, research and communication.

Developed from the software industry, an open-source model includes the concept of concurrent yet differing agendas and approaches in production². In this case, its aim is to produce engagement through accomplishing the work, mission and vision of the organisation.

An open-source session is one in which a cross-section of the organisation is encouraged

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to spend 30-45 minutes at an informal, fun and beneficial collaborative forum, where they can learn something new, contribute their thoughts and take on responsibility for tasks that transcend the formal job role description. This is an informal and unstructured action learning set, sourced from any individual, team or department that has something of value to share or work on.

How does this contribute to engagement?

The Institute for Employment Studies in April 2004³ described engagement as “a positive attitude held by the employee towards the organisation and its values. An engaged employee is aware of business context, and works with colleagues to improve performance within the job for the benefit of the organisation. The organisation must work to develop and nurture engagement, which requires a two-way relationship between employer and employee”.

It also concludes that the main components of engagement are involvement in decision-making, freedom to voice ideas (to which managers listen), feeling enabled to perform well, having opportunities to develop in the job and feeling the organisation is concerned for employees’ health and well-being.

Open-source sessions deliver on these components by reducing the rigidity of organisational hierarchy, leveraging informal learning and creating a network that is inclusive. This means that anyone in the business can involve themselves in a wider forum, learn about topics that were the domain of certain departments or groups and find responsibility beyond the confines of their role. They are afforded a sense of emotional attachment to the wider operation of the business and this profoundly influences their willingness to learn and perform at work.

Categorised succinctly by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development⁴, engagement has three dimensions: intellectual engagement, or thinking hard about the job and how to do it better; effective engagement, when employees feel positively about doing a good job, and social engagement, or actively taking opportunities to discuss work-related improvements with others. These dimensions are inherent in the open-source approach.

How does engagement contribute to the business?

Analysis from the IES’s 2003 attitude survey⁵ of more than 10,000 employees in 14 organisations



in the NHS found that responses to engagement included a positive attitude towards, and pride in, the organisation; a belief in the organisation's products/services; a perception that the organisation enables the employee to perform well, and a willingness to behave altruistically and be a good team player.

An understanding of the bigger picture and a willingness to go beyond the requirements of the job are also vital characteristics of an engaged employee and the benefits to the business are all clear: if an organisation's greatest resource is its people, these traits contribute largely to operational efficiency and business success.

Towers Perrin's global workforce study in 2007-2008⁶ identified that, of highly engaged employees, 88 per cent believe they can have a positive impact on the **quality** of their organisation's products, compared with only 38 per cent of the disengaged; 72 per cent believe they can positively affect **customer service**, versus 27 per cent of the disengaged; 68 per cent believe they can have a positive impact on **costs** in their job, compared with just 19 per cent of the disengaged.

It also stated that engaged employees feel a strong emotional bond to the organisation that employs them, demonstrate a willingness to recommend it to others and commit time and effort to help it succeed.

Towers Perrin says: "The fundamental element required to thrive and grow in this business environment is people — the energy, ingenuity and engagement of your workforce."

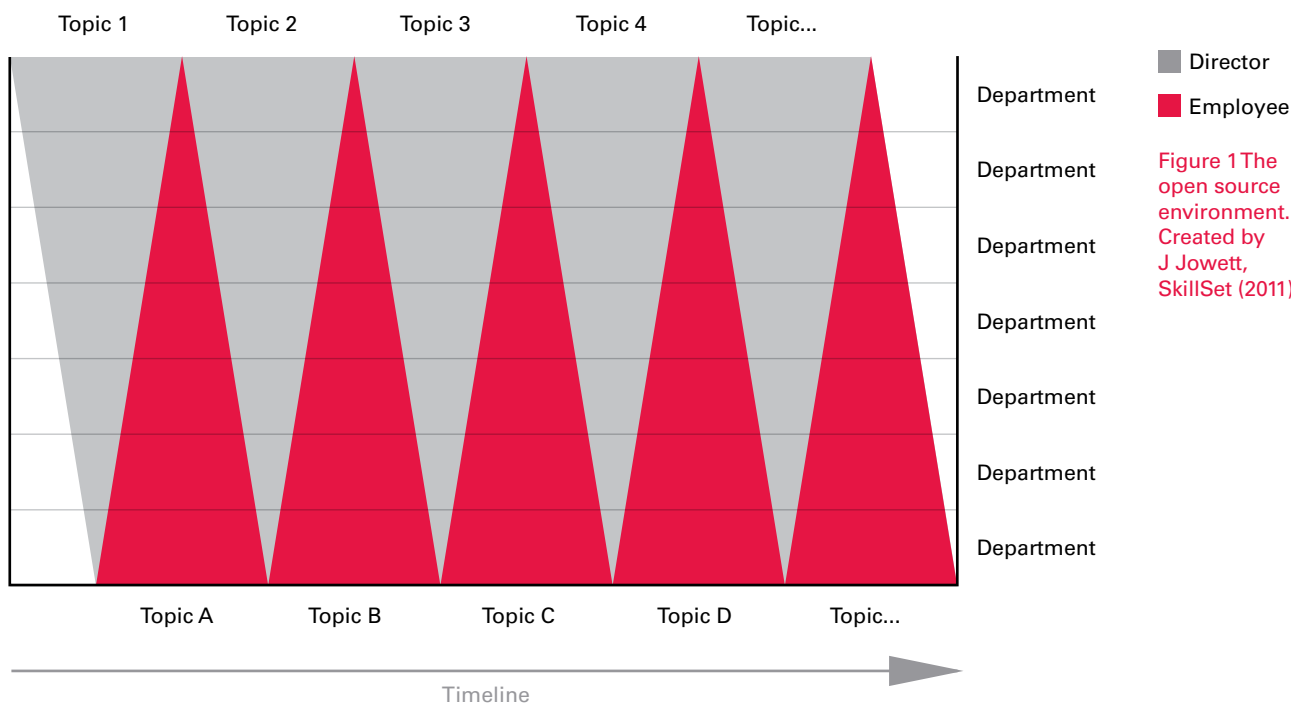
What are the challenges for employee engagement?

IES's further in-depth analysis of the NHS case study data⁷ revealed that engagement levels can vary. It found that engagement levels decline as employees get older, until they reach the oldest group (60+), where levels suddenly rise and show this subset to be the most engaged of all. The data also showed that managers and professionals tend to have higher engagement levels than their colleagues in supporting roles, although people in the latter group appear to owe greater loyalty to their profession than to the organisation in which they practise their craft.

The analysis found that engagement levels were more likely to decline as length of service increases and that having an accident or injury at work, or experiencing harassment (particularly if the manager is the source), all have a big negative impact on engagement. Lastly, it showed that employees who have a personal development plan, and who have received a formal performance appraisal within the past year, have significantly higher engagement levels than those who have not.

The findings demonstrate that organisations need to work hard to prevent, or minimise the impact of, bad experiences. They also need to ensure that they take employees' development needs (including the special needs of professionals) seriously, value the roles of support staff and maintain the interest of longer-serving employees. The relatively high levels of engagement of older employees, and of minority ethnic staff, suggest sources of untapped potential.





■ Director
■ Employee

Figure 1 The open source environment. Created by J Jowett, SkillSet (2011)

The implementation of open-source sessions

Organisations wishing to implement open-source sessions as part of their engagement strategy need to have a clear definition of what they seek to achieve, the values they wish to embed, the measurements they wish to use and clear guidelines for running them.

Without these in place, there is danger that these sessions can be hijacked by senior management to disseminate information, by individuals to establish their own political agendas and by departments to monopolise proceedings. These aims go against the ethos of the activity by placing exclusions on others and limiting the wider cross-fertilisation of ideas. Equally, these sessions should not be used to communicate or facilitate organisational change activities. No forum on redundancy or changes to the pension policy is likely to engage the workforce population.

Ideally managed by the communications or training function, the engagement team should seek to host these sessions on a bi-weekly basis, identifying a wide range of sources from within the business, by department, level and role, who would like to contribute a session on a topic of their choosing. This would be done via invitation or on a voluntary basis. These topics would be promoted well in advance of the open-source session. In the initial phases, the team may randomly target invites to attendees across the

business; the element of public event needs to be maintained, the caveat being the size of the available internal venue.

Figure 1 above shows the planning environment for developing these open-source sessions, with the engagement team looking to pinpoint appropriate resources across their organisational structure.

There is a choice for each topic: whether it should be delivered by a director/manager or employee/expert, which department that resource comes from, and who will be initially invited or targeted to gain a wide cross-section of the organisation.

Anyone running a session will be appropriately briefed and supported by the engagement team who, in essence, can help them shape their session, giving ideas and best practice in delivering a successful outcome. Emphasis is placed on making the session fun, interesting and interactive with some opportunity for follow-up and action. The defining guidelines are that they are there to encourage people's voluntary attendance and should aim to engage.

The overall outcomes of the session are dependent on the topic and its aims and objectives, though there is an opportunity to link these sessions into individuals' PDPs or CPD. People should receive credits for keeping their wider business knowledge up-to-date through attendance and, crucially, through delivery, recognition of which will also be gained through the active communications process.

References

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- 6 http://www.towersperin.com/tp/getwebcachedoc?webc=HRS/USA/2008/200802/GWS_handout_web.pdf
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- 8 <http://www.davidzinger.com>

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Open-source sessions, if managed well, can provide the business with feedback, action and initiatives.

Differing agendas and approaches

Topics and outcomes within an open-source approach can be wide-ranging, from straightforward learning to wide-scale research. Training should be delivered in the form of short, department-specific, learning-orientated buzz sessions within the open-source options.

Feedback from employees is a useful tool for engagement, whether covering the sustainability of an organisation, getting an insight into feelings towards changes in the canteen menu or conducting checks on a company's progress towards engagement.

Action-orientated topics may include examining methods of addressing a decline in demand for a company's product in the market, using peer review questionnaires or focus groups. In the current climate, looking into any costs that can be saved in specific areas without affecting quality or service provision is a useful research topic. In optimising efficiency, a company's processes can be examined, which is useful for its continued development.

They may involve attendee research, tests and activities following the open-source session. Members of the session network can take ownership for doing research in their own area and then feeding back to the initiator. This informal networking is also beneficial for career development.

Open-source categories are open for people to source and use. There should be no set annual agenda and the value of the intervention needs to be primarily measured against engagement and company performance. While some might argue against governance of the scheme and its straightforward cost/benefit, it needs to be recognised that a working population who are engaged, attached and feel a sense of responsibility can deliver beyond expectation, as they find a place for their talents and qualities.

To sum up, David Zinger, who founded the 4,000-member Global Employee Engagement Network⁸, has a three-word work focus: engage, educate and enliven.

He states: "Recognise that employee engagement is not a fluffy extra but the *fundamental* way you will get work done with others through *conversation, co-creation, community, mutuality, and other inclusive approaches* to achieve results that matter to organisations, customers, leaders, employees and yourself." **TJ**

