

Research impact: making a difference

Improving employee engagement and performance

LSE's Emma Soane played a key role in research that helped to define and disseminate best practice in the area of employee engagement

What was the problem?

How people engage with their work affects both the individual satisfaction they derive from it and the contribution they make to an organisation's performance.

Without properly understanding the factors and processes involved, managers cannot hope to develop greater engagement among their staff.

In the UK little has been known about how individuals engage with their work. Filling this research gap has been vital on two counts: first, to develop effective measures of engagement, and second, to assess the contribution engagement makes to individual and organisational outcomes.

The results have wide-reaching implications for leadership practices and managing human resources in general.

What did we do?

In 2006 the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) commissioned Professor Katie Truss at Kingston University to investigate the processes through which individuals engage with their work. LSE Assistant Professor of Management Emma Soane was the project's Assistant Director and responsible for developing the theoretical foundations for its initial stages, which included a nationwide survey of 2,000 employees. (Soane did this work while at Kingston Business School and joined LSE in 2008.)

The following year Truss, now at the University of Kent, established a consortium of eight public- and private-sector organisations to take the research forward. Besides Truss and Soane, the team was composed of researchers at other UK and international universities, including: Rick Delbridge (University of Cardiff); Kerstin Alfes (Tilburg University, the Netherlands); Amanda Shantz (York University, Toronto); Mark Gatenby (University of Southampton); and Chris Rees (Royal Holloway, University of London).

The next stage of data collection and analysis involved 5,291 survey responses from employees and managers and 180 interviews with managers, and resulted in a CIPD report aimed at practitioners titled *Creating an Engaged Workforce, findings from the Kingston Employee Engagement Consortium Project* (2010).

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A further phase of data collection took place between 2010 and 2012, involving responses from 2,173 employees and managers in five organisations, plus additional longitudinal data for 318 participants and a detailed study of the links between engagement, performance data and absenteeism for 264 participants.

At an individual level, the research demonstrated that employees' engagement with work stems from three factors: its perceived meaningfulness, their perceptions of line and senior managers, and opportunities for two-way dialogue with managers.

High levels of engagement were associated with enhanced performance, greater innovation, a stated intent to remain with the organisation, greater well-being and a belief that current workloads were sustainable. Low levels of engagement, on the other hand, were associated with higher levels of 'deviance', such as absenteeism.

At an organisational level, the research showed that policies and practices in human resource management (HRM) have a direct bearing on engagement, which then influences individual-level outcomes, notably performance.

'The resulting increase in the profile of employee engagement within the HR community undoubtedly helped to stimulate wider interest by business and within government...'

**Mike Emmott, CIPD's Advisor
on Employee Relations**

What happened?

One of the outcomes of the research was a new measure of engagement: the ISA (Intellectual, Social, Affective) Engagement Scale. Soane and colleagues were responsible for devising and validating the measure and comparing it against other engagement scales. The paper outlining its development was published in a practitioner journal, *Human Resource Development International* (Soane et al, 2012), and made freely available to researchers and practitioners.

The early findings of the research influenced the UK Government when they were highlighted in a presentation made to No 10 Downing Street in July 2008. This led directly to the establishment of the MacLeod Review into employee engagement, which was commissioned by then Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) Right Honourable Lord Mandelson and published as *Engaging for Success* in July 2009.

The research had influence on the practitioner and human resources communities through its connection with CIPD. After commissioning the initial study, CIPD continued to work with the research team as part of an Employee Engagement Consortium involving organisations wishing to learn how to raise levels of engagement, and published a series of case studies between 2008 and 2011 analysing the engagement practices of employers in different sectors.

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These case studies not only produced research findings, but also led to changes in policies and practices in participating organisations and, as a result, to concrete improvements in employee engagement and performance. For example, a manufacturing company reduced accident levels, labour turnover, product rejection rates, and overhead and direct costs while improving employee energy, enthusiasm and new product innovation, while a government department completely revised its approach to HR and a city council experienced significant increases in measures of employee engagement, motivation and pride.

The research provided a forum for debate between academics and practitioners through a seminar series supported by a £15,000 grant from the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC). Five free seminars were held between 2011 and 2013 at the Universities of Kent, Cardiff and LSE, attended by a total of 460 delegates. The seminars sought to explore the evidence and develop a theory to explain the links between employee engagement, organisational performance and individual well-being. Attached to the third seminar was a free doctoral symposium for 13 students.

The final seminar was run in conjunction with the 'Engage for Success' group, a movement launched by Prime Minister David Cameron in March 2011 based on the findings of the MacLeod Review and situated within BIS. The organisations involved in this movement accounted for more than two million employees. The 'Engage for Success' co-chairs, David MacLeod and Nita Clarke, said of the seminars: 'The programme brought together practitioners, experts, thinkers and consultants to share practice, shine a light on the importance of this topic, and offer best practice. The work has made a significant and critical contribution through developing the required insights for organisations...by creating networks to facilitate this.'

The seminar series resulted in the establishment of an Engagement Research Community subsection of the Engage for Success LinkedIn group, attracting 209 members within the first month and comprised of both academics and practitioners. It also yielded a special issue of the *International Journal of Human Resource Management*, published in July 2013. Members of the research team also co-edited and contributed chapters to a book for practitioners and researchers on *Employee Engagement in Theory and Practice* (Routledge, 2014). This brought together 29 leading scholars from the field, including William Kahn who published the original article on employee engagement in 1990.

Emma Soane is Assistant Professor of Management in the Organisational Behaviour Faculty Group. Before joining the department in 2008, Dr Soane worked as an assistant psychologist in mental health and learning disabilities services at several NHS trusts. She was a research fellow at London Business School and a senior lecturer then reader at Kingston Business School. Dr Soane has travelled and worked in more than 40 countries. Dr Soane's research considers how interactions between individual differences and work environments shape decisions, performance and risk taking. She examines the ways that people make choices about risk, their engagement with their work, and considers the implications for leaders and followers. Dr Soane has extensive

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field work experience in public and private sector organisations, including government departments, local government, NHS hospitals, manufacturing, waste management and top-tier investment banks.

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